T. A. de Creuse

DEMETRA

By the same author

XENIA

TIZIANA

DEMETRA

A novel

by

T. A. de Creuse

All names, characters, places and incidents are the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
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‘When the people contend for their liberty, they seldom get anything by their victory but new masters.’

George Savile, Marquess of Halifax (1750)

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Marcus Vanderson – Free-lance Artist
Alexis Vanderson – Medical Doctor
Odin Bachter – Boss of Demetra and Marcus' friend
Thomas Askold – Demetra's neighbour
Anissia Teremoff – Demetra's girlfriend
Miss Megan Brown – nurse, works with Alexis, volunteer in the State Committee
Fedor & Elena – Demetra's parents

Barbò: Christina Schwarz – works at Demetra's plant
Martina Lubin – Odin Bachter's wife
Eric Lubin – Martina's brother
Gian Longis – Christina's friend

Members of the State Committee

Stakhanò: Albert Issel – President of the State
Rebora Issel – Albert Issel's wife, Medical Doctor
Robert Young – Vice-president of the State
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Cast of Characters

Part Two: **Exile**

London: Building where Vandersons live:

Demetra
Marcus
Dave – porter, mole of MI6
Lady Elisabeth Onslowe – Vandersons nearest neighbour
John White – Chief Inspector Homicide Department of New Scotland Yard

Company 'Goldberg, Muller & Rickchild Ltd.' Est. 1796

Robert Goldberg – one of the owners
Demetra
Mel Sharon – boss of Demetra; Deborah – Mel Sharon's secretary
Roy Smith – works with Demetra
Joseph Dreher – courier between Karsland and London

'Gordon's auctioneers Ltd.' Est. 1787

Alan Gordon – owner of the action house
Kate Silverman - Alan Gordon's secretary, Bert Blank's niece
Marcus
Simon Gordon – Alan's brother, lawyer

Spider Group

Bert Blank – boss of London branch
Armand Green – Bert Blank's right-hand

PART ONE

Karsland

Chapter 1

The shattering sound awakened Demetra.

'What the hell…' She began and almost at once remembered her new alarm clock.

'Goddamn it and its inventor,' she cursed jumping from her bed. Quickly she reached for the black button and pressed it hard.

'Ah,' she breathed out in relief. How could he recommend such thing, she thought of the most famous psychologist.

The clock was the latest model, highly appraised for its sound, which was an imitation of a rooster crowing, one of the oldest sounds heard by men.

As for Demetra, it irritated her. Its rattling, off-key tone evoked something primitive from the depth of her soul, something that was making her to revolt against everything. On that first morning, she impulsively grabbed it, ready to drop it into the bin but stopped in time. It was not a wise thing to do. Each item purchased at the State shops was recorded on centralised computer files that could be checked by inspectors at any time. What kind of excuse she could have used if asked on its whereabouts? She didn't care for spending her precious time on endless explanations which for sure would rise, if it was no longer there. She decided to keep it and use it when needed. That day was one of those mornings she did.

Quickly, Demetra reached for her dressing gown and left the bedroom. The long corridor ran on the entire length of the house, in which at the far end was the kitchen. She swiftly moved, guided by the strong smell of coffee, filling her nostrils. She smiled, proud to be one of the few people who had the permission to drink it.

Entering the nice-sized square room, she went directly to the cupboard. Picking up her favourite mug, a colourful relic from

her family, she crossed the room to where there was a high counter with all kinds of appliances lined up, waiting to be used in her culinary pursuits.

She quickly picked up the kettle, filled the mug with steaming liquid, and brought it close to her nose, inhaling its rich aroma. 'Drink of the Gods,' she whispered, overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude and well being. She then placed the mug on the table, in the centre of the room and went to collect a jar of strawberry jam and some butter from the refrigerator, and a loaf of fresh baguette from the oven pan.

She sat comfortably and humming one of her favourite songs, she slowly began to butter her bread. And, as usual, this simple gesture brought back vivid memories of her happy childhood and everything nice connected with it. She loved those early mornings; they were the best part of her day. Those were the only moments when she felt happy, serene and secure.

'Damn it, I better hurry,' she started at the melodic sound of the kitchen timer which reminded her that her breakfast was over. 'I should be glad to be one of the chosen few, who are allowed to live in the old-fashioned way,' she immediately corrected her behaviour. Her rigid upbringing didn't allow her even to think of something being wrong with her life.

Rapidly swallowing the last drops of her coffee, she jumped from her seat and quickly began to clean up after her meal. She knew better than to leave it for 'later on'.

In half an hour's time, washed, dressed and with her make-up on, smiling Demetra pulled the handle of the back door and stepped outside. In one glance, she took in her perfectly trimmed lawn with drops of morning dew, radiating the bright summer sun and the light-blue sky with a few sparse clouds, which were so rare in those Northern regions.

On her left, she spotted her neighbour, Mr Thomas Askold, an electronics engineer, who had officially retired several years before, but had recently resumed his work.

'Hello. Good morning. Isn't it a lovely morning?' she greeted him cheerfully as she crossed the lawn.

'We don't want rainy days now, not yet, do we?' He winked as he waved back profusely.

'No, we don't. You're early today,' she replied loudly hoping he would start talking. It happened quite seldom that he was out early in the morning. Demetra was curious to find out why, but Thomas Askold just smiled at her, making her wonder what it was that made him act like that.

He has had nothing to do in that big house of his since Marianna passed away. He will be better off out of it. Staying busy is the most important thing for him. Anyway, at his age, no one will give him any job with real responsibilities. The thought of him working soothed her, as the death of his wife had shaken her at the time.

Marianna had gone to the garage to pick up something she had left in the car. She had opened the trunk and as she was bending slightly to have the better look inside, she fell forward and dropped dead. It was a strange story and Demetra brushed aside the memory of those sad days following the death of Marianna Askold.

As she approached the garage door, it began slowly to slide up; its sensor already recognised her body waves. She regarded herself as very fortunate to be granted the permission to have a car. Settling herself in the driver's seat, Demetra turned the ignition key, and the engine started without noise. Only the blinking of the start indicator could tell that it was running. She gently pressed the gas pedal down and following her silent command, the vehicle moved slowly out of the garage.

It was still very early. The road was completely deserted but it was not unusual. She loved to drive in the morning, especially in the summer. The clean morning air smelled of freshly cut grass and of something else that she could not put into words, but it was making her yearn for something, or someone, with whom she could run somewhere. And…

She quickly turned her thoughts to another direction, glancing at the simple but elegant houses, lying in a perfect line. Each dwelling was encircled by a neatly trimmed lawn. Old trees with their thick trunks were planted between the houses and thick bushes added to the privacy of each family. Demetra loved her area. She felt proud and lucky to be allowed to live there.

Viking Wish was a typical modern town, consisting of just two residential areas. One was a group of high-rise buildings surrounded by acres of Town Park, magnificently arranged and jealously kept by its residents. The other consisted of single-family dwellings and they lay quite distant from the former. Both areas were kept perfectly immaculate and opulent.

Several towns such as Viking Wish shared the common industrial and commercial areas; the latter also included all the entertainment available for its residents. Demetra was heading to the former.

The town could have been one of many others spread across the green valleys and hills but for one small thing that set it aside from the rest: Viking Wish was chosen as the capital city, after the ratification of the State Peace Agreement that had taken place over seventy years before.

It had created a small northern area located between Sweden and Karelia called Karsland, a new, independent country of half a million inhabitants. Comocratia ruled the country, a communal state where everything belonged to the country and was used in commune. The country was governed by State Committee, consisting of people with the highest intellectual abilities. English had been chosen as the official language of the new country. Demetra didn't know why Viking Wish, a small rural centre, lost between high mountains, was granted the honour of becoming the State headquarters. Nevertheless, she was glad that it was so.

The heavy notes of Beethoven's Sonata number forty-one cut into the air. At once, she released the gas pedal. The car, a little Lynx-Ford, an exact copy of the precedent model from many

years before, slowed down and the merry sounds of the fast fox-trot told her that she was now within the speed limits.

As if I could care, she thought, bravely, being alone on the road. It was not a secret that various sensors, registering car speed, had been strategically placed on every road and was ready to report about any infraction. But she knew that no one would have dared to warn her about her driving: she was a member of the minority, too valuable for the State. She belonged to that ten per cent of the population, so called Stakhanò, who worked continuously on the creation of new, more sophisticated things to satisfy the whims and wishes of the rest, who called themselves Barbò, who never worked in their life.

The bright yellow stripes on the pink building came into view, bringing her short journey to the end. She drove to the control gate. Crossing a green strip, she lifted her hand in a silent greeting, knowing well that the guard had spotted her on his screen. She turned to the left, heading to an open parking area behind the building. As usual, it was empty but from a few dozen cars.

Demetra left her vehicle without bothering to lock it; petty thieves did not exist. No one was in sight anyway. She entered the pink building by a side door as any other working day. She glanced at the identifier and saw its red colour changing into green. The entrance door began to move slowly and she was in. The big lobby clock marked two minutes to eight. Wanting to be on the production floor by eight o'clock, Demetra rushed to the stairs that lead to the first floor.

She pushed the door of her office which flew open producing a loud, scratchy sound that startled her. 'I better tell the maintenance clerk to check these hinges,' the quick thought ran through her mind.

Without stopping, she went to the built-in closet on her left. As she did, she threw the handbag towards her desk, where it landed precisely in its centre. 'At least I am good at that,' she chuckled at

her own gesture. Retrieving her white smock, she rushed back to the door.

Almost running through the long corridor, she stopped just for a second to pull on the smock above her dress. While still arranging it, she pushed a heavy door and entered the production area, precisely at the sound of the bell announcing the beginning of a new turn.

As a production manager, Demetra had the right to set her own working hours. She was not obliged to come early in the morning, but she felt responsible to do so, setting a good example for the others. She stopped for a moment to adapt to the tremendous noise that was an inseparable part of any manufacturing process.

The plant, known as 'The impossible dream', was one of the leading factories in the women's apparel. Demetra was assigned to supervise the production area that dealt with cutting materials using computerised patterns. The modern machinery didn't need any labourers: it did everything automatically, using robots where necessary. The few people who were in charge of operating and maintaining the machines were all college graduates.

Glancing around, Demetra spotted a group of operators on the farther side. One glance at their vigorous gesticulations and redden faces was enough to see that they were involved in a hot discussion, or maybe something even worse. She quickly moved to their direction. Just as she neared, a sudden silence felt in the place. For sure, there was no warm welcome on the angry and irritated faces, looking at her expectantly.

'What's going on here? Early meeting?' she began authoritatively and stopped at once, amazed at the concern written on their faces.

'Nothing, Miss Breloff. Nothing special. Everything is alright.' Christina, one of the young operators, quickly assured her. Although, her burning face and its agitated expression told Demetra a different story.

'Well. In this case, let's start working.' She chose to close the

matter, thinking on reopening it at her convenience. The group dispersed immediately in silence.

It was very unusual to see the operators assembled. Since the theory of individualism won the hearts of the State population, meetings and social organisations were automatically dissolved. There was no need for them anymore. At present, everyone was an individualist and cared only about oneself. Freud's dream had come to life at last.

This is why seeing people gathering like that, especially with angry faces, were so unusual that Demetra promised to herself to get to the bottom of that matter. Since she was already on the production floor, she decided to make her daily check-up on machinery and work progress.

Walking slowly, she caught the sound of suppressed sobs coming from somewhere nearby. She turned into the passage between two folding machines and, after a short walk, entered an opening. It was astonishing seeing Christina there, sitting on her high stool, crying desperately, her hand pressed firmly across her mouth to suppress the sound of sobs. She presented a heart-breaking picture with her head down, and her hair covering her face, and shivering at each moan.

'Christina, what's wrong with you? Did someone hurt you? What's happened?' Demetra stepped closer and put her hand on the girl's shoulder that shuddered at her touch. Then she lifted her head and Demetra read on her tear-stained face the same fearful expression that startled her early.

'Nothing, Miss Breloff, nothing.' Christina replied keeping her eyes down.

'What do you mean nothing? People don't cry for nothing. Their faces don't look so tormented for anything.' Demetra contradicted her in a quiet soft voice. 'Tell me what's going on. I'd help you,' she insisted, as she caught a flick of hope crossing Christina's face.

'Miss Breloff. I'm afraid. Everybody's talking about some mysterious disease, striking Barbò only, having no symptoms or any

kind of warning. Like, one day they were well and strong and the next day, they drop dead. Apparently, no one had survived it. Every Barbò is afraid. Yesterday, one Barbò woman, died and no one knows why or how.' Christina continued to sob.

'What nonsense you're talking about! Some mysterious disease! You know very well that all dangerous diseases had disappeared from our life a long time ago. The most dangerous of them get cured nowadays in just two week's time. For sure, there must be some explanation to all those rumours. I think it's best for you to just forget about it, don't get upset for nothing. You'll get ill just from worrying about that imaginary disease. Also, you're not Barbò,' Demetra firmly stated.

'My parents are.'

'Your parents have nothing to do with you. Your life is different, and you must stay strong as all of us Stakhanò,' Demetra prompted her.

'I'll try.' Christina smiled, drying her tears with her handkerchief.

'Good girl.' Demetra lightly tapped her on the shoulder: 'Let's see what you've done with your assignment.' She neared the bench and switched on Christina's computer. 'Don't forget we must go on with our work, unless you want to speak to Mr Bachter. You know how he can get angry if we're behind of our schedule,' Demetra reminded her. By changing the subject, she hoped the girl would relax and forget about the Barbò matter.

Christina was a young, quiet woman of about thirty. She was born into a Barbò family and, as all children of Barbò, was brought up in the State Dormitories, in short "Statedom", which were institutions created by the State Committee for that purpose.

During first three years every Barbò's children was raised in the State Nursery and was then transferred to the Statedom.

Knowing that the years of child's mentality formation are the most important ones to their future, the State Committee wanted to be sure of bringing up the ones who could take their

proper place in their Society. Using the famous "The Principles of Psychology" by William James written in 1890 that gave roots to the science of mental growth and health, the new rulers reintroduced mental intelligence tests using the latest sophisticated methods available on the market. The tests meant to label children (Stakhanò as well as Barbò) by their mental abilities and to group them according to their performance. Once the child was assigned to some particular group, he had to stay in it permanently. Generally, there were no ways to shift from one group to the other. Each group had its own level of achievement. In some cases one could get excellent results at the exams and has been moved to a higher intellectual levelled group. Christina belonged to one of those rare cases and she was granted an intellectual promotion.

She was never given a chance to be with her parents. The Statedom didn't encourage parental visits, since the State Committee regarded them as an obstacle to their proper education. Christina's parents were Barbò, simple, nice people who spent their life enjoying luxury, idleness and TV. Their small apartment was spotless clean and light and their polished furniture smelled of fresh wax.

However, there was nothing that made Christina feel at home there. She never knew the warmth of her mother's cuddle or falling asleep under her faint murmur, telling one of the Fairy Tales. The Statedom could never approve such loving care, knowing that children brought up by their mother have been attached to her, and in time of individualism it was better to keep them away from their mothers, unless there was no chance to create an individualist.

Christina managed to complete the four-year college career and get the employment: supervising the automated cutting of material into patterns, which was recently programmed on her computer. Her job was monotonous, but not difficult and she was proud to be granted to work. Although the life of Barbò was easy and happy, it was an idle life made for non-ambitious people. Christina was different: she liked feeling important and useful, which was so unusual for someone from Barbò background.

Leaving the girl to her work, Demetra slowly walked to her office thinking about that mysterious disease. Was there any truth in Christina's words or was it just Barbò's imagination? She decided to keep her eyes and ears open.

* * *

'Today we'll have a very special meeting dedicated to our new production schedule. It's needless to say we must meet all dates given by the State Committee. Our plant has been chosen to prepare special sets of clothes for the celebrations of the seventy fifth anniversary of our country, as all of you know well. Mr Issel personally called me and asked if we're able deliver such a huge order. I've assured him that we can.' Mr Bachter's deep, powerful voice sounded loud in the silence of the conference room, reaching to its far corners. His big, solid body clad in a well-cut business suit radiated energy and an immense strength, which attracted many people to him. He was born a leader, fully matching his name, Odin, the Leading God of Vikings.

Quietly, Demetra opened the door and slowly entered the room. She quickly glanced around noticing that everyone was in. There was no doubt about the importance of the meeting.

'Miss Breloff, do you have any questions? Since you've just arrived, you might ask what subject is in the air, 'he reprimanded her covertly.

'I was on site. Busy. Forgot about the meeting.' Demetra muttered, hating herself for giving such a childish reply. 'If I understood correctly, we're getting new orders…'

'Good, at least you didn't miss this information,' Mr Bachter interrupted her, 'you are right. We're getting new orders. Only the difference between the old and the new is that this order is double the size of our usual ones and must be completed in half time. Is that clear? For everyone?' he slowly turned his head trying to catch everybody's eyes and to read their expressions. But most of his subordinates tried to avoid his piecing stare. They were just silently listening to him.

'Since there are no questions, the meeting is over. All details will be on your desks by the afternoon. Starting tomorrow, we'll be 'open for business,'' he joked. The sound of shifting chairs and shoes on the marble floor was the answer.

'Miss Breloff, wait a moment, I want to speak with you.'

'Yes, Mr Bachter.' Demetra stopped and turned to face her boss.

'I've heard today, at the beginning of the morning shift, you've ran into some sort of trouble. What was it?' His voice held a concern.

'Nothing special. Someone died and everyone got upset about it. I found it quite strange to see so many people discussing the death of someone unknown to them. It was very unusual.' Demetra twisted her lips.

'Is your current order up to date? Do you think you'll be able to complete it by today and start a new one tomorrow?' Mr Bachter suddenly changed the subject.

'I hope so,' she replied haughtily. She didn't care for him not trusting her.

'Don't hope. Get it done. Otherwise, Mr Issel and the rest of his people will be on our backs for the rest of the year. See you later,' he briskly dismissed her.

'What a morning!' Demetra thought, turning to the door.

'She's getting too arrogant or maybe it's time for her to get married. I wouldn't like to see her becoming a blue stocking,' he thought, looking at the closed door.

'Brenda, bring me some coffee, please.' Replacing the telephone receiver, Odin Bachter reclined in his ample armchair. His gaze was directed to the opposite wall, on the antique painting by one of the famous artists, but his thoughts drifting far from it. Demetra's news puzzled him; her casual reply was so typical for someone of her generation. She seemed not to care for life, none for death. Just a perfect industrial machine, doing what she was told. But he, Odin, understood more than he had shown outwardly. His concern was genuine. He wanted to find out more about that

death. But there was no way to do so without being noticed. It was no secret that the factory was full of State Committee sympathisers, who would not appreciate him investigating the matter.

Someone cautiously knocked on the door. Odin assumed an upright position and let a blank mask slip on his face: 'Come in.'

'Mr Bachter, your coffee. I hope you don't mind, I've made you an espresso.' Brenda placed a small round tray on the nearby side table: 'After such a busy meeting I thought you might needed one.'

'Thanks. You must have read my thoughts. Everyone seems to be on edge today. What's going on? Did you hear anything unusual? Are there any weddings ahead?' He played fool. She was his only hope to get some news. But, as usual, she had heard nothing. Brenda was very good at her work, but the worst on gossip. She had no private life at the office. She was a real Stakhanò and did not want to mingle with other secretaries, who mostly came from Barbò families.

'Yes, sir, you're right, there is something in the air. But it's no celebration. It's about that death. Today everybody is speaking about the unexpected death of a Barbò. She went home after playing cards as usual, neighbours said, but in the morning, she didn't show up for her morning walk in the park. Her neighbours, wondering about her absence, decided to go knock at her door, brushing aside the protocol manners, which required a telephone call before ringing the bell. There was no reply. They forced the service door and entered the apartment. They found her in bed and, already cold. She was dead for a while. They called the State Forces.' Brenda stopped for a moment. Then she added: 'She was a young, quiet, nice woman in her early thirties. As most of Barbò are. Not married. Very good at tennis. She lived in Residential area C. The strangest thing was that no one ever remembered her being ill.' Brenda confirmed his worries: her information sounded like trouble.

Chapter 2

The bright sun penetrated through the heavy draperies, playing on the brass plates displayed on the wall. Its reflection fell on a small, thin man, sitting on the armchair placed at the big oval table. He shifted to the left, but could not escape its glaze.

'Robert, close these damned curtains,' his high-pitched voice was irritated.

'Albert, today you are so jumpy. You always say the best touch is the touch of the sun. What's wrong now? Have you changed your mind?' The huge, robust man rose from his seat across the table. 'OK. I'll do it, but you'd better tell me what's bothering you.'

'One of my informants reported that the Underground Movement is growing.' A concerned line crossed the forehead of the small man.

'Again, your dear subject, the Underground. You are dreaming. I haven't heard anything of the sort and I have a good number of my own informants. Relax, forget about it. Your informant must be crazy or he wants to deal with you. He knows your pay is good and wants to keep it running somehow. He made it up.' Robert said.

With agility so strange to be seen in such a giant, he reached for the windows.

'Robert, be serious. My informant has proofs. He brought me the names and places where meetings of the Underground members occurred. I believe him. He's Rebora's cousin and doesn't need money.'

'If it's so, no one knowing that he is your relative would spill the beans to him.' Robert swiftly moved around the room, hanging near the bookshelves. With awe, he stared at the beautiful leather-bounded volumes lined up behind the glass. He enjoyed looking at the collection, envying his superior for having it.

'Robert, do you hear me?'

'Yes, I do. All right, if you think there is some truth in it, let's see what we can do on the matter.' Reluctantly, Robert turned his back from the shelves to face Albert.

'I want to eliminate any potential rebel. I want no rebellious thought ever to reach Barbò's area. For over seventy years, to be precise, seventy-five years next month, we've lived in peace. My ancestors' dream came true: to conquer without any bloodshed. We've conquered the State and my intention is to keep it that way.' Mr Issel stated.

'I agree with you. Let's make a plan on how to neutralize these criminals,' Robert suggested, heavily plonking into his seat.

Complacently, he looked into the face of his superior. In the well-shadowed room, Albert's features sharpened to resemble ones of a little boy who aged before his time. The deep wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, the bolded head. All of it was in great contrast with his immaculate business suit. The white-snow shirt, of fine linen, was complemented with a parrot-design tie of the latest fashion. A diamond pin kept it in place. Everything was expensive and elegant on Mr Albert Issel, President of the State Committee, and the highest ruling body of Karsland. Robert Young envied the small man. He was just wondering how such an insignificant person, who hardly managed to get a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration, could have been chosen for such an important role.

Moreover, he, Robert Young, having Four Degrees, PhD in Finances, Masters in Psychology and Arts, was just the Vice-President of the State Committee, with a moderate allowance and no real power. Robert regarded himself as being unlucky. Even in his personal life he failed to succeed; it was a complete disaster. He had managed to marry the only daughter of one of the richest men of Karsland, the industrial magnate who owned the private jet production line. His wife was a Barbò, a spoiled brat, as it could be expected given her background. However, she was not

only spoiled, she was stupid, even for a Barbò. He had married her for her family's influence and prestige, and yet they'd never accepted him as one of them.

After several childless years of their marriage, his wife accused him of impotency, using it as a reason for getting rid of him so she could marry a younger man. To his own surprise, he was glad she did. He was now free to start a new life and maybe the next marriage would bring him some happiness. He was in his late forties, but with an average span of life of about a hundred years, he hoped to have enough time for everything.

'Robert, did you hear me? What do you think about it?' Albert's voice reached him at last.

'Yes, I agree with you.' Robert shook his head as of getting rid of all the unpleasant thoughts and looked directly into Albert's eyes. Robert always agreed with his boss since he could not afford to argue with him, unless he wanted to be expelled from the State Committee and he surely did not.

'In that case, I'll do it.' Albert concluded.

'I agree.' Robert repeated wondering what Albert decided to do, but he didn't dare to ask for not showing his distraction.

Albert stared at the bulky man sitting across from him and wondered how Mother Nature could have given such a huge body to such a small head and an even smaller brain. He never took seriously all of Mr Young's Degrees. Albert believed that a Degree is needed for the appearances, but only the real quickness and wit of the brain can make someone a winner. Studious people never impressed him. His parents were the best example of it. Both of them had Bachelor's Degrees, but they'd managed to be at the highest posts in the State Committee and helped their son to reach that too. Their slogan was: "*Keep everybody under your foot or you'll be kept under theirs*." And it really worked. They were privileged people and only Albert knew the real reason why.

'Albert, call me when you're ready and I'll do as you want. That's all for now?' Robert rose.

'Yes. I'll see you later on.' Albert stared at the broad back. He was so deep in his thoughts that he didn't hear the door closing. A complete silence fell around him.

Albert's thoughts were again on the Underground Movement.

His memory brought him back to that time when he was just a small boy of five.

He remembered that day very well: it was in the middle of one of the coldest winters, the icy-powering rains and thunderstorms had raged without stopping, sweeping everything on their way. The streets were deserted and nothing could reduce someone to step out and face the fury of the elements.

The heat coming from the wood burning in a big fireplace had spread through a drawing room, making everybody feel warm and comfortable. It was teatime on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Albert was sitting on the lap of his grandfather. He enjoyed the familiar smell of his cigar and something sweet, which he didn't know the name of, but it was connected with his grandfather only. With eyes half closed he watched his parents having a conversation with some visitors. He felt sleepy and happy. Suddenly the door burst open and a big man forced in. To little Albert, he resembled some kind of giant, who stepped out from a Fairy Tale. His appearance seemed to be unexpected, since everyone looked at him curiously. The giant went directly to his grandfather and began to speak in a loud, angry voice. Surrounded by everyone who was of petite stature with soft and low voice, Albert never saw such a powerful robust person whom presence and behaviour was so different from the others. Albert was scared. He tugged on his grandfather's sleeve that in return comforted him. Albert began to cry. He heard the old man saying to the big man: 'Go away. Why are you here? I have nothing to do with that business.' The angry man screamed back: 'Yea? Haven't you? You are a killer! You killed her and you know it. I know all your tricks and I'll do everything to show to everybody your real face! Usurper! Mark my words: I'll give my life

to overthrow your slavery.' At last, the bodyguards rushed into the room and took the man away. Albert felt the rows of powerful shakes taking over his grandfather. The old man's hands trembled, his face covered with sweat.

'Go to your mother, Al,' he said in a shaky voice. Albert obeyed immediately.

'Give me some whisky.' The grandfather ordered to his valet who stood behind his chair silently. The room was silent at once. And even Albert knew that when his grandfather asked for a drink, it was a bad sign. The old man lifted the shot quickly and drank it in one gulp. The strong liquor burned his throat, taking away his breathe and bringing tears to his eyes. He cleared his throat, slowly gazed at everyone and began his speech.

'All of you know what he's talking about. And I believe he'll do it. He's capable of destroying everything that we've achieved. Those people don't know what it means to be an outcast, to be despised by everyone, by every nation, everywhere. But we do! It took us centuries of struggles and many fruitless researches until we'd found a way to overrule everyone. And now, this man will make us pay for the death of his wife, whom he loved so much, just because he wasn't able to forgive us. I feel in my blood that we'll be fighting the Underground. If it's not going to be me, it will be you,' He looked at his son, 'Or Albert.' He took a deep breath and added in a stronger voice: 'Norman, you must never let anyone to snatch the reins of our ruling. You must be always on your guard and kill any attempt of revolt at its birth. Don't make the mistake of brushing aside its first feeble signs! These people will not give up. Remember the Soviet Union: anyone who'll be noted for their free speech or display of real dissatisfaction must be stopped and condemned to labour camp. One more or less of them makes no difference to us. But it will prevent bigger troubles. Remember my words; any resistance must be cracked at its beginning.'

At present the greatest fear of Albert's grandfather, the Under-

ground Movement, was a reality. Cold sweat covered his back. What to do? How to stop it? How can someone erase divergent thoughts from people's minds? How can someone make everyone to obey, obey forever?

* * *

Ever since the foundation of Karsland as an independent country and the formation of the State Committee, the day of the 17th September was chosen as the Creation Day and was to be celebrated annually.

That year, the seventy-fifth anniversary was regarded as one of the important dates and should have been remembered as such by each Barbò and Stakhanò, the State Committee decided. To implement it, in addition to concerts, meetings, conferences, movies and books dedicated to its celebration, each citizen was presented with a set of traditional clothes representing the origin of the country. Even though the only language spoken in the country was English, the State Committee's record department could trace the history of each citizen, his origins and background as far as seven generations back, which was regarded as a point of complete renewal of one's personality. The elaborately embroidered jackets, fine jewellery and the rest of the clothes of the highest quality to match them were a lavish gift, but nothing was too expensive for the State Committee. Demetra's plant was closed for a week to let everyone enjoy the festivities in full.

Mr Issel held a house party yearly, inviting a few Chosen Ones to celebrate with him that important day. Demetra was always included into his guest list. That year was not different from the others.

She was late, so when her car reached the Issel's residence, the valet customarily attending to guest's vehicles was not in sight. She parked in the gateway and got out.

'What an embarrassing situation! I wish I could slip in without being noticed,' she thought, being worried, but on her face was one of her sweetest smiles to be registered by hidden CCTV

placed around the compound, not mentioning the inside of the house.

As she neared, the door began to open slowly, revealing the huge rectangular hall.

'Demetra, my darling, so nice to see you,' the hostess, Mrs Rebora Issel, warmly greeted her. She looked spectacular: tall, slim, well-groomed in an elegant black velvet evening gown, off shoulders, and sparkling diamonds to liven the colour of her dress. The professional make-up covered the imperfections of her face making her look younger, in spite of her age. She'd turned fifty-two last spring.

'Sorry, I'm late…' Demetra started but Rebora interrupted her: 'No problem, darling. What matters is that you're here. Mr Issel is somewhere around. Make yourself comfortable. Something to drink? Help yourself,' she waved towards the long table placed on the far end of the hall. It was crowded with guests. 'We're late with dinner. It'll be announced in a few minutes. You still have time for refreshments. Go, enjoy yourself,' she added.

'Thanks.' Demetra smiled and went towards the table.

The reception was held in the hall, which was the central place of the house. Several crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling brightly illuminated it. It was decorated in style of antique Viking's Fortress, with its high cathedral ceilings, long narrow windows with multicoloured glass on slops of the roof to let the light in and heavy wall hangings, representing scenes of hunting or battles. The abundant riches of that place always impressed Demetra.

She tried to imagine how that hall could look daily, without all that illumination and loud crowd. It must be gloomy, dark and cold, she decided, but she was not sure about that.

The orchestra invited for such occasion was playing one Strauss waltz after another but no one was dancing. The crowd, composed of various people of different colours, nationalities, languages and costumes was so thick that she had to stop for a moment before deciding which way to move. It looked more as a

masquerade party than an official house party for a country celebration. She continued to move about, idly, noticing the same faces as from the previous year and the year before that. The pompous display of riches of all those people and more to it, their pride of being so rich and powerful, made her always wonder if these were not any changes shifting from monarchy to the comocratia. Albert wants to be loved by everybody, she thought sarcastically, listening to the Babylonian bubble of guests, cloaked in their colourful attires.

Glancing around, she spotted Robert Young, who was in a deep conversation with one of the guests. It has to be quite interesting, Demetra thought, judging by the size of the group surrounding him, snatching each of his words. Mr Young was booming. He looked as the happiest man on Earth, with his small head rested on powerful shoulders and his huge, heavy-built body was shaking in rhythm with laughing bursts. His exceptional intelligence and knowledge always fascinated Demetra.

'Don't look at him as he's a living God. When you'll learn the reality of life, you won't bother to waste your precious time on such buffoons as Robert Young.' She heard a deep voice behind her. Turning around, she faced a tall blond man.

'Hi, I see you're a newcomer here,' he smiled benevolently.

'You speak about yourself, I assume.' His arrogant stature angered her.

'Oh, no, I meant you,' he then openly laughed, seeming to enjoy her frustration.

'In that case, you're mistaken. I've attended at least five of these parties and never met you here,' she hotly contradicted him.

'Well, it may be so. I was out of the country for… let's saying over seven years. Freshly arrived from Italy.'

'Italy? You're kidding. I've never met someone who went abroad and I work closely with the elite.'

'Maybe not close enough to get permission. Are you Barbò?' His question took her by surprise. She'd never thought of resembling

one. Seeing her startled, the man laughed again: 'I joked. You don't look like one. Although, I couldn't care less, if you were.' She kept silent.

'Let's get acquainted. My name is Marcus Vanderson, freelance artist.' He held his hand out to her.

'I'm Demetra, an engineer.' She reluctantly took his hand; it was soft and warm at the touch.

'By the way, is Alexis Vanderson some relation to you?' she unexpectedly asked, remembering Anissia, her girlfriend, who knew someone by such name.

'He's not only relation. He's my younger brother,' the man proudly replied.

'Oh.' She held her breath suddenly.

'Is something wrong with it?' Suddenly, he sounded uneasy.

'No.'

'You know him, don't you? Otherwise, why in the name of all Saints would you ask me about him?' he insisted, greatly surprising her with the use of such an antique expression. Apparently, he read it on her face and his following words astonished her even more: 'In Italy, as well as in any other European countries, religion is still a thing; they're still worshipping the Saints.'

'I guess it's your luck to see such places, which are out of reach for the majority of us,' she replied, slowly, being perplexed by him.

'You didn't answer my question,' he reminded her.

'Your brother is a friend of my best girlfriend,' she absently replied, thinking on how to free her hand from his.

'You should have said it at once. For a moment, I thought *you* where his close acquaintance. In that case, you'd be unattainable for me,' he then laughed loud. His face cleared.

'What do you mean?' she didn't catch the meaning of his words, being increasingly confused by his strange behaviour and unusual speech.

'I couldn't date my brother's girlfriend, could I?' he grinned at her teasingly.

'What do you mean? I don't go out with every man who introduces himself to me. You may have spent a lot of your time abroad, but I am sure not long enough to forget that here, in Karsland, no woman would go out with a stranger whom she met on the street. You know it well. Excuse me, I must greet someone,' she angered at him. Getting the courage at last, she pulled her hand away from his abruptly.

'I guess I have no other way but to apologise for my *faux pas*. You're right that being away for several years had had its effect on me. I've completely forgotten that in our motherland we must always be polite and well-mannered, despite what we think or feel,' he said, stepping closer to her. She was tall, but he still towered above her. She lifted her head to look into his face and one glance was enough to recognize what kind of man stood in front of her.

His face was the picture of arrogance and pride, which could seldom be seen in Karsland. It was the face of a Viking warrior from the far past, with a very high forehead, aquiline nose and stubborn chin. His eyes of light grey roamed her up down, and looking at his mouth, she noted that his quite full lips were pressed together forming a stubborn red thin line. He had a deep line that ran between his bushy eyebrows, slightly to the right, which gave to his face an expression of toughness, almost cruel. His eyes were warm and welcoming and looking into them she drowned in their clear depth. He slightly shook his head as in disapproval of her scrupulous study of him. At his movement, his light blond hair, cut very short, too short for the local fashion reflected the light of chandeliers.

'Did I pass your test? You've passed mine,' he smiled at her. The deep line between his eyebrows had smoothed and all his face radiated the content of a young boy who got his toy at last. She didn't know why such an incongruous thought came to her mind. She would have been very surprised if it were the exact thought that ran through his mind as well. That beautiful blond girl was so serious and unattainable that he promised to himself that it

would not be long until she would be in his bed. He didn't care if he would be forced to marry her in order to have her. There were divorces even in Karsland; he could always get one, if needed.

'I don't think it would be a good idea for us to meet again,' Demetra slowly uttered knowing well she wanted to see him again.

'If you don't want to, all right, I won't insist. If you are concerned about local rules and regulations, then don't worry. I'll find a solution. You…' he suddenly stopped looking above her head. 'Wow, look who's there,' he beckoned to someone: 'I'm here. Come.'

Demetra looked in that direction and saw his brother, Alexis, moving towards them.

'Hi.' Marcus slapped slightly his brother on the back.

'Hi. I didn't think I'd met you here,' Alexis smiled, 'welcome back to our social functions.'

'Could you please introduce me to the lady?' Marcus uttered officially, but his face was mocking at her.

'Hi, Demetra. I can see my brother didn't lose his time to catch one of the most attractive girls around here. Did he ask you for a date? And did you refuse?' Alexis continued cheerfully.

'Of course, I did. Well, it's not that I…' Demetra began.

'Well. Now you can trust me. I'm not just anyone from the street, but a respectable citizen of the most peaceful country that ever existed since the Almighty created us.' Marcus bowed to her.

'Anissia!' Alexis' loud exclamation took them aback. Quickly, Demetra turned her head to see the newcomer. Marcus did the same. And there it was Anissia. Booming Robert Young was holding her close to him, as admitting to the whole State his possession of that exquisite beauty: gorgeous, extravagant, magnificent Anissia. Turning her gracious head to Robert, she whispered something, and he released her arm. The girl swiftly headed to Alexis.

'Oh my God,' was all that he managed to whisper before the perfumed, dazzling Anissia neared them and lifting her head to meet Alexis' eyes, she greeted him warmly.

Alexis looked completely dumbfound. 'There must be some mistake. She's not the girl whom I knew all those months. She didn't look like an ice queen at all.' The quick thought ran in his confused mind.

'I am so glad you're here.' Demetra hugged her girlfriend.

'Anissia, meet my brother, Marcus.' At last Alexis managed to utter, shocked by the drastic change in the appearance of the girl. She glanced at him covertly and smiled silently. For sure, it was not the Anissia whom he met at the library. The formal presentation seemed to embarrass her. For a moment, he glimpsed the timid girl.

'It's my pleasure.' Marcus bowed over her hand and pointed to his sibling. 'I can see you didn't lose your time either. I must admit you're right the other day when you said I went away for nothing and lost a lot by staying abroad for so long. I'll do my best to recuperate my losses and gain what I can. Although, I'm afraid the most beautiful women are all engaged.' Marcus smiled at Anissia, sending his quick glance in the direction of Demetra.

'There is nothing between Robert and me. We're just good acquaintances.' Anissia stated in a serious business-like voice. Marcus lifted his eyebrows looking at his younger brother. This girl was not an easy conquest, he thought.

Then there was a sonorous bell sound announcing the dinner was ready, sweeping away any other thought off their minds, but that of a delicious, excellent meal.

Chapter 3

The busiest day of the year seemed to never finish for Doctor Alexis Vanderson, the medical examiner at the State Hospital in Viking Wish. He had one of those days when one wished it would be over soon and never repeat it again. And when, at last, he was on his way to the exit, tired and worn out and hungry, one of the new young doctors greeted him.

'Hi, Mark.' Alexis then remembered that chap. 'I've heard you've been promoted to assistant professor. Congratulations.'

'Thanks, Doctor. I've made it at last. It was a real task to get to that level. I hope to work with you one day, if you don't mind,' he smiled.

'Of course, I don't. You should…' Alexis stopped at the sound of a siren, which broke the usual silence of the hospital. Both of them turned to face the main door at the end of the corridor that was wide opened and the emergency medical team entering in, pushing the cart at all speed. Alexis managed to step closer to the wall right in time, as the medical team passed by him. His experienced eye caught the sharpness of the patient's features and the greyish colour of the face. He's going to die, if he hadn't died yet, the thought crossed Alexis's mind and he slightly shivered at that gloomy thought.

'Doctor Vanderson, please report to your department.' The loudspeaker called for him almost at once.

'Doctor, there is a call for you.' Mark pulled Alexis by his sleeve, since the latter didn't react at all. He stood there without moving. Mark pulled him again.

'What are you doing? Don't touch me!' Alexis barked at him, suddenly offended by his unceremonious manner.

'Sorry, I thought you didn't hear the call.' The young doctor apologised.

'Of course, I did.' Alexis replied curtly, feeling uncomfortable for his outburst.

'I better control myself, unless I want to be isolated from everybody,' he thought, turning back and quickly walking to his department. 'It seems as I'm going to skip dinner too. Sometimes I wonder why I've chosen this profession.'

As he entered, he stopped for a second, dumbfound by the big crowd there. In the centre of the room towered the Chief of the Emergency Department, Dr Bloomingdale, surrounded by his staff. Everyone was talking. Alexis could not remember another occasion when nurses were freely speaking to doctors. It was unheard in Karsland. There must be something extraordinary going on here, he thought.

'Here you are. We're waiting for you, Alexis.' The deep baritone of Dr Bloomingdale overpowered the rest of the voices. Suddenly, a complete silence fell in the room. Everyone was looking at Alexis.

'You're a lucky man, Dr Vanderson. For the first time in over sixty years we, I mean our hospital, have a chance to perform a real autopsy on someone who was a victim in a homicide case. I've never thought to live long enough to see it. Well, Alexis, he's all yours. Make sure to report on the case,' Dr Bloomingdale said, smiling at him, which was a bit out of place under such grave circumstances.

'Are you not interested?' His voice got mildly irritated at the sight of Alexis' blank face and his persistent silence. The Chief of the Emergency was not used to be slighted by anyone. He thought of himself of being generous and in that particular case, his kindness was abundant toward a simple medical examiner as Dr Vanderson. He expected a wave of deep gratitude from the doctor, certainly not that coward's restraint.

'No. Well, I am but…' Alexis began to speak but stopped, not knowing what to say. Only then, Dr Bloomingdale noticed his withdrawn face and the lines under his eyes. Alexis looked extremely tired.

'Let me explain to you what's going on here. A few minutes ago a patient was brought in with a stabbing wound. It was too late for us to do anything to save him. He passed away on the way to the hospital. Poor man. I wished to perform the autopsy myself, but I'm granting this privilege to you. You've deserved it.' The Chief was benevolent now. At last, the importance of the event downed at Alexis with its full force.

'Thanks. I'm honoured,' he replied quickly and then glancing around, he noticed everybody was looking at him, some with envy, and some with admiration.

'You deserve it. It's a once in a lifetime experience in our law-obeying country.' Dr Bloomingdale's face boomed at Alexis's words.

'Thanks again for trusting in me.' Alexis repeated and came down to business: 'Where is the body? In the morgue?'

'It's on the table in the operation room number three,' one of the nurses replied.

Immediately, he sped up to his office to change.

* * *

'Let's see what we have here.' Alexis rubbed his hands in anticipation. He was back in his environment, where he felt secure and important. For a moment, he looked at the dead body in front of him. It was placed on the operation table, as usual, and Miss Megan Brown, his assistant, already rolled in the cart with the surgeon's instruments.

'It's a lucky day, isn't it, Nurse?

'Yes, Doctor.'

'I guess we'll be busy today for some time. It's my first homicide case and I want to do it without rush,' Alexis said, adjusting the spot light.

'Doctor, do you think you'll need me?' Miss Brown asked in a small voice.

'What's wrong? Of course, I'll need you.' Alexis raised his eyebrows.

'My shift is over. I know it's a unique case, but I need to take care of something at home. It's very important,' she said keeping her head down.

'Really?' He turned to look at her and was surprised by her humility, which was not a part of her character. Something had to be wrong with her. He was sure.

'I guess I can do it without you. You can go,' he said deciding he'd be better off without her.

'Thank you, doctor.' Alexis could hardly hear her whisper. He glanced at her face again, and noted something, which he never saw in all his years of work with her: Miss Megan Brown was smiling.

'I wonder what she's planning to do today,' he thought, turning again to the corpse lying in front of him. He heard the sound of the door closing, but didn't care anymore for her or anything else. All his attention was for the dead man.

Taking a deep breath and courage with it, Alexis took the scalpel with his right hand and with the left pressed on the button of the recorder.

'Male, about 40, Caucasian, very light complexion without any special marks.' Alexis began. 'Extremely light complexion,' he stressed.

Methodically, he went to examine the corpse centimetre by centimetre, not wanting to miss anything. But he found nothing except for the deep knife wound, which pierced the main artery instantly floating the abdomen with blood, poisoning the body with the substance coming from the intestines, which were cut in several places.

'Poor thing. He had no chance with such a wound. Somebody knew well what he was doing when they stabbed him.' Alexis thought looking at the perfect male's body. 'To get such physical health he had to spend his life at the Fitness centres. What a waste!' Alexis was dismayed.

When the autopsy was over, he switched off the spot light and quickly went to the sink removing his gloves on the way. Drop-

ping them into the wastebasket, he pressed on the pedal. The water ran noiselessly or he was so deeply caught in his thought that he didn't hear it at all. Slowly, he soaped his hands and forearms and rinsed them, still thinking about the dead man. Then he splashed his burning face with cold water to calm himself down. However, it was not cold enough to cool off his anxiety at performing a real autopsy. Who wouldn't have been agitated under such exceptional circumstances?

After drying his face with a special antiseptic towel, he went directly to the desk. He sat on the chair and studied the prefilled forms placed on top of the desk. Then he glanced at the wall, where the procedure regulations hanged from a big oak frame and underneath a few photos of various cases. In none of those he could find an answer to his question.

'There is something strange about that man. But what?' The thought nagged in the back of his mind. He glanced at the papers again. The ready-made autopsy forms, which he had to fill in with the current date and sign, were waiting for him. He would attach the taping of the procedure and everything would have been ready for processing.

Alexis took the pen and bent closer, ready to sign. In that moment, one wild thought ran through his mind. He dropped the pen and quickly rose from his chair.

He took off the white sheet, covering the body and he studied it again. Under the light its skin was too pale, patched greyish-white. That is normal for such kind of wound, he thought. But the dead man's skin was so transparent and lucid that it was impossible to believe it belonged to the healthy, outgoing man type.

'That's it. The skin is too transparent for a healthy man. ' That was the strange thing, that was bothering him.

'I must find out why,' Alexis said loud. At the sound of his own voice, he winced, as something ran over him. 'What nonsense!' He said loud again, but on purpose this time. Then he put the gloves on again, deciding to get some samples for testing.

Carefully, he selected a piece of tissue from internals and a tiny piece of the main artery with the blood concealed in it. Then he cut off a small bunch of hair and clipped off his finger nails. He placed both slips of hair and nails in separate plastic bags.

These must be analysed in the morning, he thought, quickly sewing the skin openings. He didn't want someone to inquire about it. As soon as he was done, he covered the body again. Then he moved to the water sink, rapidly removing his gloves.

In that moment, a loud knock at the door broke the silence of the room. He jolted, but quickly recovered.

'Are you here, Doctor Vanderson?' Several men in plain clothes of the State Forces entered the room.

'Yes. Well? What's the matter?' Alexis continued to soap his hands without turning to look at newcomers. As many of Stakhanò, he distasted those Special Forces, but he could not openly show it unless he wanted to be expelled from the country or spend his life under house arrest, watching TV.

'Sorry for the disturbance, doc. My boss, Mr Young, told us to move that thing to our quarters,' he pointed to the corpse. 'In the morning, it must be buried, as you know, by customs. If you're finished, we'll take it.'

'I've completed my examination just now. I'll sign your papers first, and then you can take the corpse. You can leave it here in our morgue and pick it up tomorrow.'

'Our orders are to move it immediately to our quarters,' the man in charge rebuked, looking suspiciously at Alexis.

'Well, in that case, it's yours.' Alexis stated quickly, wondering why such a rush to remove the dead body from the hospital. It was true that the custom was to bury it on the same day but, in some special cases, the body was left at the hospital as long as needed. He could not remember the last time someone came to him and categorically demanded it like that. It was very strange. He was curious to find out why.

'We have orders to collect every document along with anything

that is connected to this autopsy,' the man added sweeping the room in one glance.

'Please, help yourself.' Alexis opened his arms wide taking the room in: 'Whatever you want, it's yours.' His well-disposed manners brought the smile to the hard, wind-bitten face of the man.

'Doc, I'm a soldier. I'm just obeying orders.' It was quite a surprise to hear something similar to an apology from a Guardian.

'It's all right. I understand. There's nothing else to take, really.' Alexis stepped to the operation table and pulled the sheet away. At the sight of the naked corpse roughly sewn and blood stains everywhere, the startled sound came out unexpectedly.

'Still naked?' the man was taken aback.

'Of course. You wouldn't expect me to dress it up? It's a mortuary job.' Alexis pretended to be offended.

'Sorry, doc. I didn't mean to be rude. We'll take him as he is.' The man apologised for the second time.

'His clothes are in the other room. You can dress him there, if you want. My assistant already left, but let me find someone who can help you,' Alexis offered. He was happy to find an excuse to get out from there. He didn't want to continue their conversation, which sounded more and more like an interrogation.

* * *

Alexis continued to stare at the piece of paper he was holding in his hand. It was the result of the analyses, which he had waited for, anxiously. On the surface, his face was blank but his mind was in turmoil, trying to absorb the meaning of what he was reading. The blood results were the most terrifying:

Gamma-globulin – 0.001

Iron – 0.001

Leucocytes – 0.1

It was crazy. Those numbers made him to scare stiff. It was out of imagination. Then he remembered the grim, withdrawn face of Bob, the only trusted colleague of his, who brought those results.

'If someone gave me this paper, I'd have thought it was all made

up. I've analysed the blood myself and checked it twice. Alex that man had no blood left in him. It was contaminated water. I swear it, in front of the icon. That man was contaminated by radiation,' Bob said quickly, turning his head to look around in case someone heard his loud exclamation.

As a medical examiner, Alexis could confirm the death was violent, but as a Medical Doctor, he knew the dead man was terminally ill. Radiation? Where could a Barbò get it from? Sitting inside his cosy apartment and watching TV? In the attempt to find answers to his questions, Alexis decided to pay a visit to the library. Maybe he could find something there.

* * *

The State Library was consisted of several red-bricked two-three-story buildings, surrounded by a high red brick wall. It was the only old-fashioned building around. It was supposed to recall an historic construction, as high brick walls encircled all ancient fortresses; or at least the leading architect, in charge of the structure, decided it was so.

Alexis was not fond of that building. He always associated it with prisons, although, if asked, he could not explain why. Anyway, there was no time to lose, he thought, heading to the research section.

Looking around for a librarian, he spotted Anissia Teremoff at one of the corner tables. Alexis went directly to her.

'Hi, how is everything?' he did his best to sound casual, brushing aside their encounter at Issel's party.

'Fine, thank you. And you?' she blushed. She was the Anissia he knew from before again.

'Not so good, I must admit. Last night I've performed a real autopsy, I should be proud of it but I'm not. That man was killed but he was very ill and couldn't have had a long life anyway. I'm trying to figure out what he had. I mean, to diagnose his illness.' Alexis didn't care of being ignorant on that subject; he was not a general physician.

'What do you mean, you couldn't figure it out?' He spotted a flinch of curiosity in her big grey eyes. In a few words, Alexis explained what happened.

'It's incredible.'

'I'm looking for some information about human contamination by radiation.' Alexis almost whispered afraid to be overheard.

'You should know it better than anyone.' Anissia was surprised by his question.

'You're right. As a medical doctor, I should. But I don't. All of us have a very narrow specialisation, which is excellent for research but as for everyday work, we're not experienced enough to identify many pathological cases. I'm no better than any other. This is why I'm here,' he explained and suddenly asked: 'Are you leaving soon?'

'No, I'll be here for a while. I'm collecting material on anomalies of the twentieth century such as rock, drugs and organised crime.'

'Isn't it too much for one person? If I remember correctly, each of those topics were studied by special Research Institutes with thousands of employees involved.'

'Their main goal was to *collect* information. As for analysing and fighting it, someone in charge decided to postpone it to a later date. The twentieth century, which was best known as *the transition period*, was famous for producing many negative things. It's now called as the century of "*treat or trick*".'

'I've always thought your PhD was in Ancient literature, Greek and Latin. I've never thought that the ancient literature included the study of vices of the twentieth century.' Alexis smiled.

'You're right. My main subject is Greek antique literature. I'm temporarily replacing one of our professors who are on a business trip to South America.'

'Oh. I didn't know our professors were travellers as well. I was too busy following the news. I don't watch TV.'

'Don't make me laughing. The last place where you can get

news is the TV. You cannot expect Barbò to understand what's going on in the State.' Alexis did not reply.

He didn't care for her off-handed remark about Barbò.

He pitied Barbò. They were the privileged class. A Barbò person was granted the idle life. Their life was divided between meals, watching TV, shopping on the State expense and doing nothing. Typical Barbò came from the former poorest working class. After centuries of fighting, the proletariat was granted not only the freedom, but also the full economical independence. Sensing his disapproval, Anissia stopped to smile.

'All right, I agree with you. However, your work isn't an excuse to become ignorant. Unless you want to convert to Barbò too?' she murmured quickly and blushed waiting to be reprimanded again.

'By the way, you looked quite regal at the party,' Alexis changed the subject.

'No one wants to be Cinderella,' Anissia replied but as soon as she said it, she felt sorry about.

'I didn't know you're one of the Chosen. I don't know why I'm one of the Chosen, but I was glad to see you there.' Alexis hoped he sounded convincing. He was dying to know the truth about her and Robert, but he could never dare to ask her. It was a prohibited subject in Karsland.

'I was invited by Robert Young.' She found the courage to speak about it. And she did so because she didn't want Alexis to think she was involved with Robert.

'Am I guessing correctly, you're not a girl who would easily fall in love, are you?' Alexis said, slowly, pronouncing each word. She kept silent. Nevertheless, he read the answer in her eyes, which begged him to forget about that party and her behaviour. Her face was sad, making Alexis to regret his question.

He admired her. She was so natural, so sweet and smart. He liked her long blond hair, tightened into a knot on top of her head. He was picturing it when it was loose, falling below her shoulders, down to her waist. He forced himself to dismiss those

disturbing thoughts from his mind. It was too dangerous to dwell on such image, which he could never or almost never, come to see. Karsland was a country made of ideal people, with ideal behaviour and ideal thoughts. He could never forget it. Besides, he could not tell he had an effect on her and he was too proud to show his real emotions.

'See you.' All of the sudden, Alexis dropped briskly to her and turning around, walked away.

Anissia looked at his tall figure, the proud posture, wide shoulders and felt miserable. 'I cannot dare to hope that he may notice me one day. He is too smart, intelligent and handsome, and of good family too. I am just an unknown orphan, who happens to be good enough to spend her life searching papers for others,' she silently sighed.

* * *

The extensive research in the most proclaimed works of the famous medical doctors, revealed nothing to Alexis. Tired and resigned on solving his problem, he was slowly walking back to his office, when, suddenly, he stopped. A running thought flashed in his mind, reminding him about Marcus. 'What's wrong with me? How could I forget about him? Certainly, he must have gained a lot of life experience in his worldwide travels. I'll go see him at once.' He rushed to the exit.

Marcus lived in Blue River; a small town located about twenty kilometres away from Viking Wish. Alexis quickly reached it. Passing through the city centre, identical to the one in Viking Wish, he drove to the Stakhanò residential area. During his brother's absence, Alexis never visited that place, knowing there were no changes and the house was safe. Marcus didn't even bother to lock it; he knew it would have made no difference, the Guardians could enter anyway and the neighbours as well, if they wanted.

It was a Bohemian area. Driving slowly, Alexis looked around admiring the sculptures and other types of artistic works on display in front of the houses.

He spotted Marcus' house immediately by its plain lawn. There were no artistic creations, no trees and no bushes. At the sight of the empty driveway, Alexis thought it was unwise to come on impulse. Marcus may not be at home. It was late to dwell over it, he thought, turning into the driveway.

'Hi, come in.' Marcus was standing in the doorway and waiting for Alexis. 'I saw you through the window. What brings you here? Come, quickly.' He sounded impatient.

'I should have called you before. I need your help.' Alexis said.

'Did the wind change? It's the first time, as long as I can remember, that you want to speak to me. What's wrong with you?'

'I have a problem. I guess you're the only one who can solve it.' Alexis said stepping in.

They were in the sitting room, identical to Alexis's, since all Stakhanò houses had the same layout, as was the law of the country.

'Wow,' Alexis exclaimed, blinded by the colours, quantity and variety of things filling the room. 'Certainly you don't need to worry about unique pieces of decoration to identify your style. I bet there's no other room like this one,' he said glancing around.

'That's what you get for travelling a lot.' Marcus confirmed. 'I couldn't resist getting a small token from each place I've visited. I knew I'll never go back.'

'Can I look at them?' Alexis went nearby the shelves.

'Why not? You can, anytime, but not today. I have some business to do and I must leave soon. Tell me quickly, what's bothering you?' Marcus asked unceremoniously.

Alexis was not perturbed by his rudeness, knowing well that under his brother's rough manners was hidden a heart of gold. As reading his thoughts, Marcus added, 'Come on, go on. What's the matter? I'll see what I can do.'

'Last night I've performed an autopsy. It was a young man, Barbò, who died of stubbing wounds.' Alexis said quietly and stopped waiting for his brother's reaction, he was sure it would come. But Marcus's face didn't change. He was unperturbed by those words.

'Well?' Marcus prompted.

'Aren't you surprised?' Alexis was perplexed by the stout of his older brother.

'Of what? Of murder? My dear brother, you should go abroad and see what's going on there.'

'I guess you're right, but here, we aren't used to such things. Over the past sixty years, there was no autopsy of homicide cases. I got the honour to perform it only yesterday.' Alexis stated proudly turning his head to meet his brother's eyes.

'I'm glad. And happy for you, of course.' Marcus met his eyes calmly. 'Let's move to the matter. Tell me quickly, what brings you here.' Alexis was slightly taken aback by the odd expression of his face.

'That man died violently. There were no doubts on that, but the strangest thing of all, was that he was a very ill man.' Alexis began slowly, in attempt to get his full attention. 'He was Barbò, Caucasian, about 40, outdoor-type. Nothing on the surface could indicate that he wasn't well. But he was terminally ill. It was just a matter of time for him to collapse. I have the blood results and various tissues tests. He had leukaemia at the final stage. His body was impregnated by high quantities of radiation, as of a man who was exposed to high levels of alpha-gamma rays, as it could be with someone who worked in uranium mines or military plants manufacturing ammunition containing nuclear elements.' Alexis concluded.

He didn't need to wonder about the reaction to his words. Marcus's ironic smile disappeared. Alexis had in front of him a new brother, one he had never seen before: serious and worried.

'Well, well. It looks like the long arm of Spider Group has reached Karsland already.' Marcus whistled softly.

'What's that?' Alexis was curious now.

'One day I'll tell you everything about it. Go on with your story.' Marcus said.

'Nothing more. As a medical examiner, I was pleased to have the

honour of doing what I was told. As a medical doctor, I was shocked by the results of the tests. And as a human, I was curious where a Barbò could have gotten all that radiation which made him ill. I went to the library to look for some works from famous doctors, but I found nothing. Then I thought of you, who travelled a lot and might give me some ideas on the cause of Barbò's illness.' Alexis finished. He was still standing in the middle of the room, in the same spot as he entered the house. He glanced again at the fancy things that surrounded him, but somehow they didn't attract him anymore.

'What do you think? Can you help me find a solution?' Alexis turned to his older brother again. Marcus didn't rush to reply. He drew near the window and looked at the grey clouds, which slowly, but persistently, were covering the light blue sky.

'It's going to rain soon,' he said ignoring his brother's question.

'Will you help?' Alexis repeated.

This time Marcus turned to face him, but still, he didn't speak. His face was withdrawn and seemed being grey as the clouds he was watching just a minute before. At last, he glanced at Alexis who looked bewitchingly at him.

'I'm afraid there's no good news for you. I don't need to tell you that in our country there are no nuclear weapons and, as a matter of fact, no weapons at all. For me as well as for you, it's a mystery. I'm also curious on how it was possible for a Barbò, who spends his life between his home and gym, to be exposed to such a high level of radiation. I cannot promise anything to you, but I'll try to solve this problem,' Marcus concluded.

'Thanks, although I should wait to say it till you solve the puzzle.' Alexis breathed in relief.

'Changing the subject, do you know that Demetra well?' Marcus asked suddenly.

'She's Anissia's girlfriend. They grew up together. I don't know much about her, except that she's an engineer and works at one of the plants. Something to do with clothing. Why do you ask? I guess…'

'Don't guess. I like her. She's smart, intelligent and beautiful. Aren't these qualities the most important for a woman?' Marcus chose to reply lightly.

'Yes, they are important when you're looking for a wife. Are you?'

'Not yet.'

'In that case, I don't think she's an easy conquest. Of course, I don't know her well. Judging by her looks and her girlfriend, there's no shortcut to her heart, not to mention her body.' Alexis tried to cool his brother off.

'When you spoke about her girlfriend, did you mean Anissia? How long has she been your girl?' Marcus went directly to the point.

'She's not my girl. We've just acquainted some months ago.'

'And?'

'What do you mean by "and"? I've met her at the library. She has a PhD in classical languages and literature. At present she's replacing one of the professors who are abroad.'

'Nothing changed. Bosses are on business tourism, and employees are working for them,' Marcus remarked.

'You're still the same, after all these years. I hoped your travels would have changed you. But…'

'You're wrong. My travels had given me the proof that I was right. This place is a prison, one big prison…'

'Sh.' Alexis quickly brought his finger to the lips and moved his eyes around, silently reminding to Marcus about the "Big Brother". Then he said: 'Let's change subject. I have no interest in politics or anything else connected to it.'

'In this case, our meeting is over. I'll look into your problem.' Marcus said and glancing on his wristwatch added: 'I'm leaving in a quarter of an hour. I must prepare myself. I'll come to you when I have some news.'

Chapter 4

Both brothers would have been astounded if they could have heard the conversation held in the luxury sedan, which was swiftly speeding up on the deserted turnpike. Two persons were clearly visible through the windscreen. The woman sat close to the man resting her head on his shoulder. The man looked ahead, pretending to ignore her closeness. It would have been less offensive for onlookers if one could have seen them like that, reading in the tenth paragraph of the Morals Code Conduct during driving.

'Odin, if you'd seen her. At first, I couldn't recognise her at all. Since I saw her last year, she'd lost at least twenty kilos. She looks so fragile and tense. Daddy's doing everything. I don't know what she'd do without him.' The woman whispered to the man's ear. Her eyes were full of tears.

'Martina, take it easy. I know it's hard for you. But you must put yourself together. What did her doctor say? What did he find out?' Without glancing at her, Odin pulled her closer with his free arm. His face was full of tenderness.

'The doctor couldn't find anything wrong with her. He said she's fine from the medical point of view. But she isn't. Over the two weeks that I've spent there, I saw her in two conditions only: either lying down on the sofa for hours, staring into the ceiling, or screaming violently at anyone who got near to her. My quiet, calm, beautiful mother, who'd never raised her voice and patiently took care of my daddy, is acting like a crazy. It's maddening to see her like this. I must do something to help her. I thought of bringing her here and have her visited by some specialist.' Martina was desperate.

Cold sweat covered Odin's back. He remembered the story told

by Brenda about the Barbò woman who died in bed. Poor thing was healthy from the medical point of view.

'My dear, you're forgetting that your parents are Barbò.' Odin felt his voice shaking but he continued: 'No doctor will ever examine her, unless she's already his patient; it's the rule number one in our country. It's a cruel rule, but it's the rule. Luckily, all our doctors are good. It makes no difference what doctor treats your mother.'

'Please help her.'

'I'll try. Let me think. One of my friends knows a good young doctor. I'll speak with him about your mother.'

'Odin, I fear for her.'

'There's nothing to be afraid of.'

'But I am. I've only brought trouble to you. You could marry Stakhanò and have your children growing up with you. Just the thought of our dear children being in the Statedom, drives me out of my mind,' she lamented.

'I love you. I could never leave you for somebody else. You know it very well. We cannot have our children with us today but I'll do everything that is in my power to change this cruel law and one day they'll be with us. I promise.'

'Odin, I fear for your life.'

'There's nothing to be afraid of. As long as you're with me, I'm strong and determined. You may be deprived by our 'beloved' State Committee of the joy of being a mother today, but they can't strip you of being an excellent wife and companion. You're my best and most trusted friend.' He squeezed her hand and whispered into her ear: 'I've missed you so much.'

* * *

The sounds of loud, light-hearted music coming from the well-known pub "Boar's Head" broke the silence of the quiet autumn night. The merry atmosphere was contagious and by-passers wondered what's going on there that day. Few of them rushed to its huge heavy door. The others suppressing the temptation

quickly walked away, casting their converted glances at the attracting place.

The vast entertainment area was designed to satisfy any whim of any resident of several towns lying nearby; one of them was Viking Wish. There were countless restaurants, bars, coffee and teahouses, few cinemas, theatres and casinos. Anything for every taste, except sex shops or anything detrimental and pernicious that could create temptations regarded as a degrading and unacceptable element.

As it often happens, the habitants of the same town preferred to stick together. "Boar's Head" was the preferred meeting place by Stakhanò of Viking Wish.

Pulling the heavy metal door, someone would find oneself in the middle of a huge hall, furnished with long rectangular tables and old-fashioned benches, both of highly polished oak. As a reminder to customers of the pub's name, the priceless stuffed Boar heads were placed on the walls between antique paintings, depicting the hunting of such wild huge beast, which was then extinct in Karsland. The iron-wrought chandeliers, painted in black, hanged from the ceiling. In the corner was a raised platform made of metal painted in layers of red bricks. It housed an orchestra, accompanying an old gypsy man who sang vivid gypsy songs, one after the other.

The other corner and a big part of the wall adjacent to it were taken by the bar which was then overcrowded. In the dim light was practically impossible to see the faces of the clients. For sure, the majority of them were men and only a few women could be spotted thanks to their long loose hair, which, at the same time, helped to hide their faces. The pub was regarded as no place for a woman. Respectable Barbò women could never dare to enter it, unless they didn't care for their reputation.

Two men, who seemed to enjoy themselves, occupied one of the corner tables. At first, it would have been difficult to recognise Odin Bachter with his shirt open to the waist with ruffled hair and

a tankard of beer in the hand. The waves of roaring followed each of his jokes, adding substantially to the noise of the already noisy atmosphere. And as if it was not enough, Odin used to whisper to his nearby companion, who smiled limpidly, looking embarrassed by a salty anecdote, as someone watching them would have thought. That man happened to be Marcus Vanderson.

'Relax, Marcus. Enjoy yourself. Get used to your own country.'

'I cannot. You're asking for too much. I feel like I'm in prison.' Marcus protested.

'You should not. It's your homeland. You're brought up here.' Odin was persuading him patiently. Seeing his efforts were in vain, he cursed under his nose, putting down his huge tankard so forcefully that the beer spilled all over the table.

'Shut up. I'm going to sing,' he shouted. All heads turned, curious to see who was today's troublemaker. The next moment, no one longer paid attention to him.

In a strong clear baritone, Odin began the old song. It was an old ballade about the hardships of seaman's life and his earnings for the wife left behind on the land. It was a sad story and didn't help to cheer up Marcus, who considered running away from there. He glanced around, wondering about others and didn't like what he saw. Everyone, or almost everyone, in the pub belonged to the working people, Stakhanò, meaning they had no less than a BS degree. However, by their way of dressing and trimming themselves, they looked more as a bunch of hippies arrived straight from the past. Marcus preferred fashionable restaurants with their elegant atmosphere, well-dressed and mannered clients, not mentioning the sophisticated cuisine. He decided he was getting old-fashioned and losing touch with the new generation. Nonsense, he was thirty-eight and still young, remembering the average life span of ninety-five. No face was familiar to him. Odin continued to sing and sipping the beer in between.

'Odin, I can't stay here any longer. My head will break into pieces. I just want to tell you some news and go.' Marcus insisted.

'None of us feels comfortable here, but Goddamn the State, we cannot meet anywhere without being followed and overheard. Only this kind of places, overcrowded and rough, the spies of our beloved President are afraid to visit. Moreover, the walls of this pub are sound and ray proof. They were built during the Peace Bridge, between the two last wars, and laid with a special metal. The electronic equipment cannot register anything. Now, my boy, did you understand why I've brought you here?" Marcus nodded silently. Odin brought him there to let him know about the only place, which he, Marcus, could use freely without thinking about moles etc. He got irritated at himself for being so naïve as to take seriously Odin's behaviour there. He asked for another drink and dwelled over it about the irony of his life. Ever since his return home, he could not adjust to Karslander's way of living yet. At the departure, he thought, on his return he would have been better at arranging his life, but then it seemed like it was just a dream.

After a while, the pub resembled the perfect noisy, roaring spot, allowing everybody to do what one wanted. Quickly catching the change of the mood in his surroundings, Odin took out from his pocket the dices and shook them vigorously.

'Do you care for a game?'

'Oh, no.'

'All right. I guess it's enough for you for today. Since you're new to this place, it would be better to take it easy today.' Marcus was relieved. It was exactly what he wanted: to leave quickly and try not to go back there, ever again.

'Is it alright if I'll tell you something very important?' Marcus was still not sure if that pub was the right place for a business talk.

'Don't worry. I'm all ears.' Odin assured him.

Without rush, Marcus repeated Alexis' story. When he finished, Odin remained motionless for a long time. At last, he broke the silence.

'It looks like we have a hell of a work to do. Something's going on in our Beloved State Committee and we must find out what.

Our beloved President seems to be hiding something and we must find out what. We must make a plan on how to proceed and start our fight for freedom. I think each of us must think on what we can do and then we'll discuss it. Let's make Tuesday our meeting day. I'll tell the owner to keep this table for us. Let's call it our weekly get together.' Odin said and concluded: 'Next week, same time and place, come with your ideas. We'll see how to act at our best on those. I don't want you to meet other members yet. It's too early. My people will find you different from them and some might not care for it. Better if you stay aside for the time being.'

'I cannot apologize for something which is not my fault. I guess my life abroad spoilt me. I agree with you, I must readjust to the local customs quickly. Thanks for everything.'

'That Old Europe made a weakling out of you. I cannot believe you're the same person I've knew before. Don't think too much about that case. We'll find a solution to everything. Good night.' Odin lifted his tankard in silent greeting.

'My greetings to Martina.' With those words, Marcus left. Odin watched him reaching for the main door, opening it and disappearing in the dark of the night.

'Greg, one more.' He called to the waiter shaking his empty tankard. The man ran on his call immediately and quickly refilled it. Sipping slowly the cold refreshing liquid, Odin was lost in his own thoughts.

Odin Bachter was an orphan. He never saw his parents, who died in some kind of accident, he was told, when he was just a baby. Statedom brought him up and it really didn't make any difference to him, as well as to his mates, if he was an orphan or not. Covertly, everyone was an orphan in Karsland.

He was a bright little boy who had been the best in his studies at school and later on at the Engineering College, where he had graduated with honours.

In addition, being very loyal to the State Committee, he was the first to defend its regulations and praise their achievements. He

truly believed into them. The loyalty, honesty and idealism were highly respected and appreciated by the Rulers and Odin being the right person, in the right place and at the right time got promoted to his present position, just seven years later after his graduation.

Mr Albert Issel followed Odin's accomplishments personally and seemed to treat him differently. Odin was pleased and felt honoured to be on the list of people who have been patronised by the President of the State Committee himself. It seemed that his star was on a constant rise, until the day he met Martina.

He was taking part at the annual tennis competition, which was his favourite game. In mixed doubles, he with his partner of the past few years, were supposed to play against their old rivals, John and Dora Wells. The previous year Odin's double easily won on the famous husband and wife team. Odin was sure that he would have won again. However, the destiny played its trick on him.

When he arrived in the morning, carefree and in a good mood in waiting of an easy and quick winning, he was disappointed to find out that Dora Wells would not take part in that year's competition and was replaced by some unknown player, Miss Martina Lubin, whom no one knew. It was a surprise for Odin, but even then he didn't worry, thinking that he would have won this competition.

As soon as the game began, he was forced to face the truth: Martina was no match to Dora and Odin knew that his forehand shots didn't match in power hers and his backhand ones were missing the marks. His double lost all games with devastating scores: six to zero on both sets.

His male pride was deeply hurt. At the same time, he got interested in that tall girl with unusual physical strength. Usually Odin didn't care for an outgoing type of woman but in her, he sensed a character similar to his. The physical strength seemed to be supported by the emotional one. He felt an irresistible wish of seeing her again.

They met and each of them sensed as meeting a similar soul. They knew there was no need for wasting their time on getting to know each other. It was clear, their interests were similar, their hobbies identical and their thoughts ran in the same direction. They decided to marry right away.

But there was a big problem: Martina was Barbò and she had to lead the life of Barbò. Generally, the State Committee did not encourage marriages between Barbò and Stakhanò. Odin, as the Managing Director of the plant, needed to get the approval from the Rulers anyway. He was astonished by the strong reluctance from Mr Albert Issel when Odin informed him about his decision to marry Barbò. He was personally invited by Mr Issel to his office and had at least two hours of lecture on the lack of wisdom for a man of his status to marry Barbò. Odin insisted and after unsuccessful attempts to change his mind, Mr Issel was forced to agree to his choice.

Odin never regretted his decision. Many times looking at his beautiful and strong wife he thought about his mother, whom he never saw, and wondered if she had something in common with Martina.

'Better go. For sure, she's worrying about me being late. When I'll tell her all these news, I wonder how she'll take them.' Odin thought, heavily rising from his chair. He reached the cashier and showed his ID batch for the registration of the bill payment at his name, since in Karsland there was no money in circulation. Then he opened the huge door and stepped out breathing in the fresh night air.

Chapter 5

The State Committee was located in a thirty stories tall building, which lay in the centre of the town park. There were no fences, nor guards, anyone could enter it. Nevertheless, Karslanders knew better than to be lured into such deception. The existence of hidden cameras, metal detectors and other similar supervisory stuff was well known. Marcus did not care for all of it. He knew there was no need to worry. His loyalty to the State Committee was never questioned and never could have been. They paid for his travels and his expenses were quite high.

Quickly, he ran up the stone steps leading to the huge wooden doors that were wide open. He entered and faced the richly decorated hall and the long wide corridor running in front of him. He turned to the right to the lifts, knowing very well his way around.

'Good morning, Marcus.' He turned to face a man of his age and similar constitution.

'John, so glad to see you again.' Marcus stepped closer to the man and held his hand out.

'I saw you entering but I wasn't sure it was you. How many years have passed since I last saw you? Six? Seven?' The man grabbed his hand and shook it.

'Over seven. I was abroad.'

'I knew you were back. All of us often spoke about you. You were lucky to see the world. How is it out there?' John was curious.

'Well, we're fortunate to live here. Our country is the best of all. There can't be any comparisons between the Old Europe and us. There is still poverty, hunger and wars.' Marcus's voice was convincing. No one could ever doubt his words.

'See you.' He cut short at the sight of lift's opened door.

'Good morning.' The man replied with notable respect.

Marcus nodded and stepping into the cabin, pressed the button to the third floor.

The lift moved smoothly and silently stopped. He got out from it and stopped, shortly blinded by the strong fluorescent light. It took him a few seconds to orient himself looking around and being stunned by the changes that occurred during his absence. The huge round hall, which he remembered as softly illuminated and void of everything except for the list of offices and its occupants, was then so bright that it pained his eyes. The several corridors running perpendicular from the hall were painted sea blue, sharply contrasting with the red of the hall. The portraits of the members of the State Committee hanged on the walls alternately with photographs of some important functions. The seventy-fifth anniversary was widely presented. Remembering the Issel's party, Marcus smiled to himself.

That floor was the heart of the country: there were located all the communication and information centres, open only for the Chosen Ones. Marcus was one of them. Quickly, he turned into the corridor third on his left and moved along to its end; where there was an information office presided by Miss Megan Brown, the loyal volunteer. The double-glass doors were wide open and as he had reached them, he stopped at the threshold.

'Good afternoon, Miss Brown. May I come in?' His smile was broad.

'Oh, Mr Vanderson. What a surprise! I haven't seen you for so long. You know well you're always welcome here, especially after such a long absence.' The woman greeted him warmly.

'I was hoping to see you today. Are you still with that hospital of yours?' Marcus asked.

'What else could I be doing? Today's my duty day here. Each Tuesday and Saturday. Sometimes on Sundays, if there is something special.' She smiled widely showing her blackened teeth.

'I can see nothing has changed here.'

'Well, it depends from which angle you look at things.'

'Were there any changes?' His voice now was curious.

'Our floor was remodelled, we've introduced new colours. Didn't you notice them? Ah, you've been away too long to remember such trivial details. That sea blue brings us closer to the sea, you know, since we don't have access to it,' she said. Then she added quickly as afraid of being interpreted wrongly: 'it's not that I'm missing the sea. I've never lived near it and I don't think I would, but it's nice to have a change of colours. I bet in your recent travels you've visited different countries. Your longest stay was in Italy, wasn't it?'

'Yes, it was,' he confirmed and abruptly changed the subject. 'Now I'm back and I want to be brought up to the date. It's not fair to neglect your own country. I know you agree with me.' Marcus sounded serious not letting her sense any doubt on his loyalty to the State. He had to be spotless in the eyes of all its members. It was well known of Miss Brown being one of the professional moles in the State.

'Of course, Mr Vanderson. I'll be glad to be of help. In fact, I've just received the latest version of the news brochures today. Do you want it on disk or hard copy?'

'Hard copy please. I'd like to read it in my free time.'

'Yes, of course.'

'I'll return it…'

'Oh, no. It's your personal copy. I guess you had forgotten that you're entitled to that. Next Sunday a concert of modern music will be held, the boys' State's chorus will perform all the songs dedicated to Karsland. Please come.' She said, looking meaningfully at the man.

'I'll be glad to, of course.' He replied readily, knowing well that it was expected from him.

'You're the real son of your parents. Up to today, I'm hearing so many good things about your parents.'

'I'll do my best to keep up with their memory. But now I must leave you. There are others who are waiting for me.' He was all

smiles and gallantry. Then he directed his steps in the direction of Mr Issel's office on the twenty-eighth floor.

Marcus remembered, when he was in primary school, one of the boys was asked on which floor was the office of the most powerful man, and he replied on the last, of course. It's closer to heaven. The whole class remained silent; the mentioning of anything connected with religion was prohibited. Soon after that incident, the boy was transferred to another school and it was then that Marcus received the news about his parents having died in a car accident. For sure, they're in heaven, Marcus thought, but didn't dare to say it loudly. One must be crafty to survive in the comocratia.

'My dear boy, I couldn't wait to see you and hear all of your stories and adventures.' Mr Albert Issel met the younger man with wide opened arms.

'I couldn't dream to make my first visit to anyone but you,' Marcus replied and then added: 'you're the same as I've left you. You didn't change at all since I remember you from my childhood. Life passes by fast, but one thing is sure, it doesn't leave any marks on you.' Marcus flattered the old man.

'Thanks for the compliment, but even I've had a hard time, especially recently. Well, no one is immune against time, enemies and problems.' The voice of the President was tired and resigned. He tapped Marcus lightly on his back: 'tell me something cheerful. How was your trip?'

'It was good overall. I've had no money problem. My allowance was abundant and granted me a comfortable life. I was treated courteously and respectfully by everyone of some standing but as for the rest.' Marcus stopped purposely. Mr Issel caught the meaning of his words at once.

'My boy, we're the richest of all and, as you know by now, money can buy everything: respect, status and freedom. As for the rest, what do we care for some… how could we call them? It's not our problem to feed all of them. If their politicians haven't managed

by now to provide for those people, what we, Karslanders, can do about it? Nothing.' Mr Issel sounded harsh, Marcus thought, and wondered what he could be hiding behind his words.

'Do you care for a drink? Whisky? Gin? Vodka? I remember you prefer this colourless liquor in memory of your ancestors, am I right?' Albert Issel went to the sideboard, which served as the wine bar and got a new bottle of vodka.

'Do you still remember what I drink?' Marcus raised his eyebrows.

'How could I forget? It wasn't difficult to remember, your father drank only Vodka. You're his son.' He was now laughing.

'Thanks.' Marcus accepted the drink, soberly. He smelled it. But the familiar aroma didn't evoke in him any wish to consume it. Those last few years, he spent in Italy not for nothing. The red Tuscany wine accompanied him in all his adventures, along with gorgeous girls. What a life it was! He sighed to his secret thoughts and lifted the glass high.

'To health and prosperity!' Marcus saluted and gulped it at once. The hot liquor burned his mouth and oesophagus. He breathed out quickly.

'Wow, it's the real thing. I've missed it,' he said hiding his discomfort behind a smile. It was not the place to show his real feelings.

'My boy, you couldn't have come at a better time. I need your help in the Public Relations sector. One of our supervisors recently retired. We have been looking for someone whom we can trust. For sure, you're my best choice, unless you have some other plans on how to spend your time.' Mr Issel looked at him quizzically.

Marcus could hardly believe his luck. He didn't sleep well thinking and thinking again on how to ask his superior for any job just to enter into the State Building and then…the President himself had offered him an employment.

'Of course, I'll be the luckiest man to get the job straightaway. I must do something to keep me busy. I'm Stakhanò. At the end

of the day, I feel tired of paintings and all that stuff. Serious office with all its responsibility is exactly what I need.'

'Excellent. I'm glad you accept it. Of course, when you have time, but don't postpone it too far, we need you urgently, go to the Personnel Department to Jack Jason. Tell him I've sent you. He'll know what to do next.' Mr Issel said and looked into Marcus' face again. He could read nothing there, except for a subordinated expression. Marcus knew better than to show his satisfaction. His words came out unguarded and they could have made the old man to wonder about his eagerness. In the past, Marcus was famous for avoiding work. His travels were arranged by his parents to hide the fact that their oldest son didn't like to work in the office.

'Did you notice our changes? We've remodelled all floors. Technology moves forward and we're forced to more along with it, although I've began to think our country should slow down on implementing the innovations. Do you agree with me? Or do you think I'm getting old and don't want to bother? Rebora is always enthusiastic about everything that's new. I guess women are more idealistic by nature than men.' Mr Issel confided to him.

'Well, I guess you're right. Being still a bachelor I don't have an opinion on the subject. I can speak about myself. As of myself, I share your idea. I like to stick to my own old things, whatever they are: shoes, clothes or pens. I've never cared for anything in fashion, you know it well.' Marcus' reply was elusive. Then, he changed the subject at once. 'How is Liz? What does she do? For sure, happily married.'

'I wish she was,' Mr Issel replied, 'but she's still searching for that perfect male who could support her wimps. You know how she is. Nothing changed. She's drinking more; I pretend to know nothing about it and the rest that comes with it. I wish she would be settled already, but I have no means to find a good fellow for her. To my shame, she's Barbò, as you know, and there's no way to change it, even I with all my power cannot do anything about it.' His voice was sad now.

'Let's hope for the best.' Marcus smiled, knowing well the daughter of the President.

'Come next week for dinner. Rebora cannot wait to hear your stories about our Old Europe. Meantime, I want to ask you a favour. Don't talk too much around about your trip. There are many folks who may want to do the same. I don't wish to pay for everyone who wants to go abroad. Some of them may get wrong ideas into their heads. Moreover, I'd be the one in charge to straighten them out, and this may be not an easy task.' Mr Issel said quickly.

'Of course, I've never thought of doing such thing. Besides, there's nothing to talk about. The Old Europe stinks and it's sinking into a complete oblivion. *Après nous le deluge*, said Louis XV of France. And it looks like he was right after all. With all that confusion and pollution. Here we're in paradise.' Marcus assured him readily.

In this moment, someone knocked on the door. Without waiting for permission, the door opened wide and Robert Young entered. Just one glance at his red agitated face was enough to conclude that something was amiss. Seeing Marcus, the big man stopped suddenly, not sure on what to do next.

'Marcus, I'll see you soon. Greetings to Alexis.' Mr Issel closed their meeting quickly and turned to Robert.

'Have a nice day.' Marcus replied politely and quickly left wondering, what might happen to make Robert Young so disturbed.

Shortly, he stopped in the centre of the corridor, deciding on what to do next, when someone bumped into his shoulder.

'What on heart…' He turned and the sight of old Askold, helplessly looking at him without recognising him, made Marcus laugh.

'What's wrong with you, Thomas? Did you lose your glasses again?' he joked.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you. I don't think we've met.' The old man murmured quickly and hurryingly searched for his glasses. At last, he retrieved them from one of his numerous pockets and put them on. Then he looked up and a happy smile

covered his face. 'Oh my God, Marcus. When did you come back? You're just the man I've been thinking about. If you knew how many things have happened to me over the last few years.'

'How is Marianna?'

'I've lost her. She passed away two years ago. I work again. Oh, you didn't know, I retired but now I'm back at my old job. I cannot stay alone at home,' he said.

'Sorry to hear that.'

'I'm trying not to think too much. During the day I can manage, but at night…' Thomas paused and then whispered: 'especially now that I think I know what's happened to her and why did she die. There are some things going on here. If you could only know.' He stopped suddenly and quickly looked around, as afraid of being overheard. Marcus kept silent waiting for some revelations but he seemed to have changed his mind.

'Do you still live in the same place?' Marcus asked knowing well that no one could change one's house until one's death.

'Where else would I go? My life is here and Marianna is buried in Smolenski cemetery. I'm waiting for my turn.'

'I'll come for tea. Tomorrow.' Marcus offered readily, surprised at himself.

'After six. Maybe it's late for tea but I can't make it earlier. We're very busy here. Very busy,' he whispered, conspiracy written on his wrinkled face.

'See you then.' Marcus slapped gently on the old man's back. Thomas nodded and went along the corridor, his white uniform swaying at his fast pace.

Whistling softly, Marcus turned in the direction of the elevators. The strange behaviour of the old man made Marcus to change his mind about postponing his employment. He decided to join the State Committee as soon as possible. It was the only way to discover what was hidden there.

Chapter 6

Demetra was on her way home. That day was one of those days when she felt to do nothing. She was exhausted by work and stressed because of the festivities.

She was driving absent-minded, not paying much attention to the road until she lifted her eyes and saw the red traffic light in front of her. She broke off suddenly. Glancing at the rear-view mirror, she spotted the other car stopping abruptly almost colliding with hers. She realised she had escaped an accident by mere luck thanks to the skills of an unknown driver. Cold sweat covered her forehead. What trouble she could have found herself in!

As soon as the traffic light switched to green, she pressed on the gas pedal hard, wanting to speed away from the strange vehicle, which was still following her as she confirmed looking through the rear mirror again. It was a new station wagon, which she didn't notice before on that road.

'I'm not surprised I didn't see it before.' Demetra got furious recognising its driver. Of course, it was Marcus, 'who else could have been so obliging but him as to get her into a car accident?' Becoming aware of her spotting him, Marcus smiled nodding her to the right as inviting her to stop. She continued to drive pretending not to understand his gesture.

As at the party, she felt to brush him aside and at the same time to be close to him. That string of opposite emotions disturbed her. She wanted to analyse them, but every time she tried to think rationally, her memory evoked his perfect body and the strong surge to touch it. Stubbornly, she continued to drive to her house ignoring his invitations.

Reaching it, she turned into her driveway. She saw his car pass-

ing her house and swerved into her neighbour's driveway. Demetra wondered if he was a friend of Thomas Askold.

'As if I care,' she shook her head to push away all thoughts about him and went to the door.

After changing into her dressing gown, she laid on the top of the bed. She closed her eyes in the attempt to relax, but the first thought which came to her mind, was Marcus with his low-bred manners and outlandish behaviour. There was something in him or maybe in her, that was pushing her to him and making her to forgive him for his rudeness. She didn't know what it was but she knew for sure, it was not love. Love, in her opinion, was the feeling too precious to speak or even to think about. She regarded it as a gift of God. Forget about him, she commanded to herself.

The doorbell rang. She cursed under her nose. It seemed like it was not the end of her day. Wondering who could be there, she dismissed Marcus's presence knowing well it would have been too much, even for him, to ring somebody's bell without previous notice.

'Demetra, I hope I haven't disturbed you.' She saw Thomas Askold outside her door.

'Of course not.' She replied with a face saying exactly the opposite to her words. Thomas Askold seemed not to note her displeasure.

'I have company today. I saw you arriving and took the liberty to invite you for tea. I would like you to meet somebody.' The old man actually pleaded her in his usual old-fashioned language.

'Thank you.' She still looked at him irritated. Suddenly she added: 'I'll be there in a few minutes,' she had no courage to refuse the invitation from that lonely old man.

'We'll be waiting for you.' Thomas said and left. Demetra closed the door.

For sure, it was Marcus' idea to get her to Thomas place. It looks like I'll never get rid of him, Demetra thought on her way to the dressing room.

When she reached the entrance to Thomas' house, the main door was half-open as if waiting for her. She pushed it and stepped into the sitting room.

Her eyes went immediately in the direction of the tall man who stood with his back to one of the bookcases and looked at her. Their eyes met. Marcus was smiling smugly. She knew at once that she had to thank him for her being there.

'Come in, my girl. We're waiting for you. I want you to meet my old friend.' Thomas welcomed her warmly.

'We already know each other.' Demetra snapped at him on impulse, regretting at once her haste. She didn't mean to be rude but the laughing light-grey eyes of that man irritated her.

'Hi, Demetra.' Marcus greeted. He clearly read the annoyance on her face.

'We've met before. At the President's party,' he explained to Thomas.

'Oh, lucky you. I have never been invited to those celebrations. Well, everyone remembers your great grandfather, I'm not surprised that you were there but as for our Demetra…' Thomas looked at her and reprimanded: 'you didn't tell me you're one of the Chosen.'

'I could never figure out why they invite me to those parties. I really don't know. There must be some mistake of identity, I guess.' Demetra went on defensive. She hated to lose the confidence of Thomas, who was her closest neighbour and seemed to be quickly becoming her friend.

'It looks like she's not alone in her guessing. It's true, my great grandfather did something for the country, but I could never figure out why our beloved President feels obliged to invite me too. I wish I knew why.' Marcus said quickly and turned to Thomas: 'How about tea?' Demetra knew then that he was trying to make peace with her.

'My God, I forgot about it.' The old man ran out from the room. A complete silence fell between them. They just glanced at each

other and stayed where they were: Marcus near the bookshelves and Demetra in the middle of the room.

'Here we are.' Thomas entered pushing the tea trolley in front of him. 'I've brought everything that I could,' he stopped it near a coffee table, inviting them to take a seat. They didn't wait for a second invitation.

'Let me help you,' Demetra offered seating herself near the tea trolley.

'Thanks, good girl. My Marianna loved teatime. She had old English blood in her. I've always told her that her love for tea was in her blood, if such thing is possible.'

'When I was in England recently, I haven't seen them drinking too much tea. It was Turkish coffee and African booze mostly. Habits have changed, even there,' Marcus remarked.

Demetra poured the tea, in silence. He noticed it but didn't comment. He was busy admiring her gracious movements. She was at ease there, giving the impression of being at home. Marcus glanced at Thomas and caught surprise in the other man's eyes. Quickly, he looked in the other direction hoping the old man didn't interpret his thoughts wrongly.

'Sugar? Lemon? Milk?' He heard her voice and turned to face her.

'One of sugar, please. Thanks.' He took his cup from her hand. Seeing her magnificent smile bestowed at Thomas, he added: 'You look like you're at home here.'

'What do you mean?' she asked pursing her lips.

'Nothing. Just a thought,' he tried to brush aside his unguarded words but by her serious face, he knew he didn't succeed.

'Well, let's forget what I said. I didn't mean to offend you. You're blending into those settings. It's what Thomas has here.'

'My ancestors belonged to this land. Karelia was their home.' Demetra pointed to him in her low but determined voice. He was not sure on how to take it. It was either disapproval, or pride.

'Tea is delicious. Although, I prefer wine, red wine,' Marcus winked at Thomas in attempt to lighten up their conversation.

'In that case, I'll open a bottle of my best red wine.' Thomas was glad to please his guest.

'No, not today. Next time. I'll bring some of my own. I've brought some wine from Italy.'

'Italy. I've dreamed of that beautiful country all my life. My Marianna and I wanted to go there for our honeymoon, but knowing it was impossible we've invented the game of travelling around the World. What a time it was!' Thomas whispered wistfully. His eyes shined in the brightly lighted room. Demetra thought it looked like tears.

'Thomas, you aren't the only one who is staying put here. One of those unlucky hundred thousand is me. Don't look at him,' Demetra pretended to joke pointing at Marcus. 'He was the only one who was allowed. I guess our President was tired of him and sent him to temporary exile,' Demetra was laughing.

'Don't joke with such things. You never know what's around the corner,' Marcus suddenly got angry. Such sudden change of the mood, took Demetra by surprise. She guessed he could be moody, but not to such extent and out of such a banal joke.

'Calm down, boy. We're here for a nice afternoon, late afternoon exactly, tea not for a fight,' Thomas tried to pacify them. Nevertheless, the good mood of the party was broken. Demetra could not wait until she'd go back home. Impatience was clearly written on her attractive face. However, Thomas seemed of being determined to ignore her displeasure.

'When I met Marcus by chance yesterday, I knew he's the one who could solve my dilemma. I've always admired you, Demetra, for your serious and strong-minded character. I wanted both of you to meet here since I've something to tell you. You're the only two whom I can trust. Please don't argue between yourselves. I want you to be together and be the best of friends. Let's drop this pretence of tea party and talk business,' Thomas announced suddenly.

At his words, the young couple looked at him and then at each

other, declaring a truce, and then again at Thomas. No one said anything, waiting for old man to continue.

'I don't know if I'm doing the right thing but I'm an old man and I need to let someone of the new generation to know what I've found out. As you know, I've worked for over forty years at the State Communication Centre and retired in time. My Marianna never worked, being a Barbò. I loved her for what she was and didn't care for her status. She was a simple but good woman and…' He stopped for a moment, and then continued: 'we were a close couple and our life passed by in peace and calm. Two years ago she suddenly passed away. Her unexpected death shocked me at first. Then I began to think about it and lost my peace. I wanted to find out what's happened to her and why she, who was never ill and of robust health, died so fast.' Thomas stopped again. He sipped some tea and looked at Demetra.

'I'm listening.' She said not knowing what to say.

'It's all right, Thomas.' Marcus assured the old man.

'Being determined to find the truth, I've used my grief, to get back to my office, I mean, I went back to work. Of course, I couldn't find anything to do but staying inside, enclosed in four walls. I needed to get out and try to investigate on my own, if I could. You know what I mean.' He stopped again and looked around. Then he turned to face them and looked into their eyes, slowly, shifting from one to the other. To her surprise, Demetra read his thoughts. His eyes told her to keep silent, be patient and wait. Then he put his forefinger to his lips and standing up beckoned to them.

They rose and follow him through the long corridor to a small room, which could have been used usually as a lining closet. Thomas let them in first and then entered himself, closing the door firmly. Then he switched on the light. The room was very small. Demetra was forced to be close to Marcus, feeling his strong male body next to hers, his breath on the back of her head. She tried to ignore it but somehow it disturbed her. What does this old man want? She thought irritated by all that conspiracy.

'Here we can speak.' Thomas breathed out loudly. He seemed at ease now. 'This is the only room which is free of any listening devices. I did all the soundproofing myself. I knew I'd need it. Let's see, where I put it,' Thomas said.

Then he turned to one of the shelves, which covered the wall and began to shift some bottles or whatever was there. At last, he turned again holding something in his hand.

'I've made a discovery and I need to tell to somebody about it, and I think you're the ones who should know. You're an electronic engineer and could know what this is, aren't you?' Thomas said to Demetra pressing into her hands a PC board as she could see it clearly now. She took it and recognised it as a one of the old models, which was replaced many years before. She looked into Thomas' eyes as asking him what he wanted.

'I want you to tell me what's in there.' Thomas said.

'Me? You're joking. You're a better engineer than I am. I'm just a pattern cutter. Nothing more,' Demetra refused.

'This is why I want you to do it. You're a woman and far from the State Committee. I could do it myself but I don't have testing equipment at home and I cannot do it at my office,' Thomas explained.

'No problem. Demetra will do as you want,' Marcus cut in quickly afraid of Thomas changing his mind. This girl is too naive, Marcus thought, knowing at once that Thomas's discovery may be the key to something big. 'I'll keep it for her.' He stretched his hand to take the PC board but she held it firmly.

'I'll do it,' she nodded to them.

'Well, it's decided. Now I can tell you more and answer all of your questions, if you have any.' Thomas was very serious.

'Where did you get it and why?' Marcus was quick enough.

'You know I've worked in the State Communication Centre for all my life. My duties were to watch the performance of the peripheral electronic equipment. I never got the clearance for serving the Main electronic switchboard, which is the heart of our

Communication system. Two months ago, there was a major breakdown on main equipment. It was the first time in over forty years of me being there that I saw so much of activity and confusion at my office. A few of our well-known scientists were invited there and they were too old to remember, I thought, what it was, but no one seemed to go against them. Everyone was tense and agitated. As for me, I was sent home after lunch and have not been present when the scientists where there.' Thomas stopped to take some air. He was breathing heavily. Noticing Demetra's concern he added: 'my heart is not good anymore. This is one more reason why I want you to help me.' Then he continued: 'On the next day when I reached my office, I found everything was in order. Main switchboard was functioning as usual. There were no signs of anything amiss. For a few days, everything was functioning as usual. Then, it happened again but this time it was in the evening shift. I was there with two others. When the Main switchboard went off, we acted by the procedure, calling one of the security guards who must be in charge of everything after. Two Guardians came. One was left to watch over the Main switchboard, preventing anyone to come near and the other went to call the Chief of Engineering Department who was in charge. I moved behind some other equipment and sat on one of the high stools keeping quiet. I wanted to see what was wrong but I knew that I'd be sent away if someone noticed me…' He stopped again to gain some breathe.

'Well, after a while, two men entered the room. I knew them very well: they glanced at the room and not seeing anyone, went directly to the Main Switchboard. They pressed their thumbs on the identifying security check and the clicking sound announced that the lock was released. One of them pulled the door and all of it was in front of my eyes. Really, it looked as any other electronic panels, full of wires and PC boards and terminal boards. They began to test the equipment. It didn't take too much time to identify what was wrong. I saw them removing one of the small PC boards. This one.' Thomas nodded to the one Demetra was holding in her hands.

'No.' The young couple exclaimed in unison shocked by his revelation.

'Yes, I've prayed to God. You know we're officially atheist people, but I've never believed into such baloney. God heard me and answered my prayers. After getting the new board and replacing it into the Main switchboard, those scientists were not bright enough. They handled the damaged board to the Guardian, telling him to destroy it and left the room. The guardian went to the garbage bin, dropped the board there, and pressed the button to demolish it. He couldn't know I've always kept the garbage bin off. I'm old now and in case I make a mistake by throwing something I'm not supposed to, I can always retrieve it. The guardian pressed the button and left. I ran to the bin and got back the board, not forgetting to cover it with paper so that the board couldn't be spot on CCTV. It was a genius move and now I want to know what's inside of it,' Thomas concluded.

'You want me to test this board in my office, correct? I'll do that. Although, it will take some time. I'll do it when I'll test my own equipment. It will be at the end of this month,' Demetra said.

'I can do testing faster. I know some people,' Marcus offered.

'No, I prefer Demetra to do it. She's a woman and above any suspicion. In addition, the State Committee trusts her.' Thomas declined his invitation.

'I still don't understand why you've decided to trust me. Why?' Demetra questioned him.

'I've watched you for all these years. We have been neighbours for quite some time now. I know you're an honest person and this is the only quality that's hard to find nowadays.'

'Thank you. I'll do it for you.'.

'I guess you could do it without me. Why did you invite me?' Marcus sounded disappointed.

'Here you're wrong. She is a woman but you are a man. After she examined the board, there will come your part to decide on what to do next and how to secure it in a safe place. I can't pos-

sibly keep it. Remember, the Rulers are the canning lot. We can never be sure with them. You're their favourite, but I have my doubts about you not being as you want us to believe. I know you well, Marcus. You're too smart to believe to their tales.'

'Of course, I should deny your accusations but I won't. I leave it as it is. I'll take care of that piece,' Marcus replied quietly.

'You must remember: all walls have ears. You must never speak about it anywhere. This room is the only place in this house where we can talk. How about yours? I'm sure you don't have a room the same as this one,' Thomas stated.

'Don't worry. We'll use the sign language,' Marcus said and then turned to Demetra. 'Since we cannot speak on the subject anywhere, when I'll invite you somewhere, do not refuse. I'll bring you where we can speak. Is that clear?' he sounded almost rude. Demetra didn't like it, but she had no other choice except to accept his conditions.

Quietly, they returned to the sitting room and took their seats. Demetra glanced a few times at Thomas, but the old man stubbornly looked into his teacup and kept silent. She didn't dare to speak, afraid her voice could tremble. She still was too disturbed by Thomas' news.

'Well, well, it looks like you're getting bored. I guess I'll put on some music to dispel the gloom.' The old man sounded normal. Demetra marvelled at his self-composure as he continued: 'I guess you've decided to have your dinner at one of our restaurants, haven't you? I could recommend one of the best.'

'I know one Demetra would like.' Marcus said understanding his unsaid message.

'Thanks, but I can't possibly go out today. Some other time.' Demetra refused categorically. Marcus did not insist. There would have been another time.

Chapter 7

It took two weeks before Demetra got a new pattern for testing. That was exactly what she was waiting for. Since all necessary equipment was in her own office, she didn't need to go to the plant's test laboratory. Thomas Askold calculated correctly, as if he knew that only she could do the testing, away from curious eyes. Demetra didn't rush after receiving a new order. She was full of impatience, but she restrained herself not wanting to get any attention due to her unusual behaviour.

'We need your answer by tomorrow morning. Can you manage?' Her boss, Odin Bachter, looked at her unsmilingly when she did her usual round of machinery, urgency in his voice.

'I'll try my best. As soon as I complete my test, I'll immediately inform you about its results. All I need is to be left in peace to do my job.' She dared to reply arrogantly.

'I have no problem about it.' Odin ignored her impertinence. He knew her well. She was slow on the surface but in reality, she was an efficient worker.

As soon as lunch was over, she locked her office door hanging on the outside door handle a sign "Please do not disturb" and quickly went to her bench. She was smart enough to put Thomas' PC board into her inner pocket and once seated on the high stool in front of the bench full of various boards, she casually removed it from her pocket and placed it with the rest. To an untrained eye, the board looked like the others; the Guardians were not trained to recognise engineering devices. Another thing was her boss, Odin, who could have spotted her folly at once, but she was sure he didn't dare to disturb her knowing her bad temper, as it was on everyone's lips.

Demetra connected the oscilloscope and pattern sensors to her

computer and switched it on. Then she took the first of new pattern PC boards and inserted it into the slot. The new pattern appeared on the screen. She saw the usual sinusoidal waves were on oscilloscope and no division on sensors. The board was without defects and she saved the file on her computer. She looked at the others waiting for her testing. This time, she took Thomas's one.

First, she disconnected her computer from network to secure its privacy. Secondly, she divided the hard disk in three. After inserting the board into the slot, she recalled its file to the part of hard disk assigned to it. She expected to get nothing on the screen. To her surprise, there were half-sinusoidal waves crossed with straight continuous line. Moreover, after equal intervals, there was a blinking pinkish point, small at the beginning and then it grew fast, until it covered the screen before disappearing. After a few seconds, the pink spot blinked again growing into a huge round circle and covering the half-wave, and then disappeared again. It was a repetitious pattern. The operation of this device puzzled her. In her professional experience she had never met anything similar.

As hypnotised, she continued to look at the screen wondering what it could mean. Finally, coming to her senses, she quickly saved that data on hard disk. Then she switched her PC off and removed the board.

She put magnifying glasses on and began methodically to examine the circuit of the board. It was a green PC board of the old-fashioned type with resistors, capacitors, transistors and other semiconductors. She noted the burned spot, which was strange by itself. It was just a micro black point, which could be taken for dust. However, she decided to test the board with a meter. All components were in normal condition, until she reached the dark spot. After it, the circuit was dead.

Following the circuit from that spot she began to count, one capacitor, one resistor, two transistors, one LED and… She stopped noting the strange component, which she could not name. It was a tiny black box marked S with two wires coming out and welded

into the board. Nothing more. What was it? She didn't know if it was what Thomas looked for or if it was just some out-dated semiconductor. She was sure: the board was one of the first generations, over a hundred years old. She encircled the black box in red and put the board down on the bench.

'And now? What should I do?' She thought, removing the magnifier glasses and looking at the board again. Without magnifying lenses the black box was just slightly bigger than the head of a sewing pin.

'It's a mystery. What's that?' She wondered not daring to move, remembering about CCTV on her back. Without wasting more time, she transferred the saved file to CD. Then she deleted it from the computer, marked it "Brahms" and, opening one of the drawers she dropped it casually into it, to be kept together with hundreds of others. She itched to run to Thomas immediately, but she suppressed her wish. Taking a deep breath, she relaxed, brought her computer to its initial state and began to test the new pattern boards, given to her by Odin.

On her way home she stopped at Thomas' house, who warmly welcomed her. Without any words, Demetra nodded at him.

'Excellent work.' He rubbed his hands contently. 'You keep it with you. I'll contact Marcus and he'll know what to do with it. Good girl. Now go home and rest. You've had enough for today.'

The telephone rang persistently, awaking Demetra who had fallen asleep on the sofa. The tense of carrying illegal test was too much for her, although she realised it only then.

Looking at the ringing phone, she got afraid to pick it up. It was night time; the clock showed two in the morning and a crazy thought came to her mind: it could have been the Guardians, sent by the State Committee to arrest her for her disobedience. Her whole body was covered in cold sweat. Her hands began to tremble. I must put myself together, she commanded to herself, rapidly leaving the sofa and going to the phone. Before picking the receiver up, she took several deep breaths to calm down. Then

the phone went quiet. Whoever it was on the other side, hang up losing hope to reach her. She stood there for a while, looking absently at the phone, and then she came to her senses, relaxed and slowly went to bed. The day after was a working day and it would have been wise to get her sleep.

* * *

'Miss Breloff, you have a visitor, a gentleman is waiting for you in the reception room,' Brenda panted heavily, as after a long run: 'We've been trying to reach you by interim but couldn't. Didn't you hear us calling?'

'I didn't.' Demetra replied without turning her head from the screen. She sat on the high stool next to Christina. They were busy with the setting of new patterns, which she got the day before and already tested.

'Miss Breloff, please come to the reception as soon as you can. Someone is waiting for you. Waiting seems to annoy him. He's a very impatient man,' Brenda bubbled and then added in a very low voice: 'Also, he said, he's your fiancé.'

'What?' Demetra choked at her own voice. 'Tell him, I'll be there in five minutes.' Brenda's agitated blushed face made her furious. 'I said I'll be there in five minutes. Go and tell him.'

'Yes, Miss Breloff. I'll do that,' Brenda replied humbly and left them at once.

Looking at the screen, Demetra then saw nothing. Recalling the telephone ringing in the middle of the night and the panic that overtook her then, she got irritated at herself. She should know better that no one could have called her at such time, except for him. He chose to live by the Old European customs, ignoring those of Karsland.

'I'll be back soon. Have a second look at these new curves, which are on patterns number twenty-one and twenty six. Test them for extra large and extra small sizes.' Demetra instructed the girl and left for the reception desk. She recognised his tall familiar figure at once.

'What do you want?' she asked unceremoniously. What right had he to come to her workplace? All that she needed was for everyone to think he was her fiancé. How dare he present himself as that!

'Demetra, at last. You took your time, my dear,' his voice was reproachful. She hated it at once.

'What are you doing here? I'm busy and have no time for visitors. Please make an appointment through Brenda,' Demetra said and turned to leave the room. He blocked her way out.

'I said we're engaged. I thought it's better this way in order to stop all possible gossip,' he whispered into her ear.

'Brenda told me about it. You must be completely crazy. Engaged? We? Nonsense! I don't know you at all,' Demetra uttered coolly.

'I guessed it would have made no difference to you. You don't have a boyfriend. No one got hurt. Also, I like the idea to be engaged to you, to the successful engineer,' Marcus smiled widely.

'Shut up! How dare you imply such thing?' His words insulted her; she forgot her manners. With the corner of her eye, she noticed Brenda's curious face. The secretary's neck seemed to lengthen with each word, as she tried to overhear their conversation. Demetra changed her tactics.

'Come with me. To my office,' she dropped her voice to a whisper, looking down to the floor.

'Yes, ma'am,' Marcus mocked at her, stepping aside and opening the door. Without looking at him, Demetra walked into the corridor and turned in the direction of her office.

'Well, well, it's cosy here,' he glanced around. 'I guess these are your private, untouchable quarters where you can do what you want.' He caught her eyes and she knew he was speaking about the testing of Thomas's board. She ignored his remark. Instead, she went directly to her desk and took her seat facing him.

'Mr Vanderson, what's your problem?' Demetra tried to sound unperturbed. She already guessed why he was there. Thomas had sent him. She was sure of it. Marcus took a seat in front of her

desk and bent over it as far as he could. His smile was wider than usual.

'Demetra, we're not going back to Mr and Miss. You know well my name. Let's drop all this old fashioned stuff. I'm here to invite you to dinner. Dinner is the best time for a nice conversation and so on.'

'What do you mean, by "so on"?'

'You know, my sweetheart, what I mean,' he continued to smile but his eyes told her that he came for business.

'I'll think about it,' she decided to play his game. She had not forgotten about the two CCVT in her office.

'You know, my dear, it's always more convenient to eat outside than at home. You don't strike me as a cooking enthusiast. Am I right?' Marcus insisted. Demetra understood he wanted the board that day and as fast as possible.

'All right. You've convinced me. I'll be ready. Come to my house; let's say at 6:30,' she agreed. Then she remembered about the CD, which she kept in her drawer. She thought it was not a bad idea to give it to him. He could have it checked before their appointment.

'By the way, I still have your Brahms. I brought it here to listen to sometimes, but I've never had a chance. Take it. I don't want to keep your things too long.' With those words, she opened the drawer containing CD disks and finding the one marked as "Brahms" took it and placed in front of him.

'Oh, no, my dear, I don't want it yet. You should take it back home and listen to the soft melody and think about me,' he refused it categorically. Demetra didn't know what to do next. Marcus stood up suddenly and went to the door.

'I don't want to waste more of your time then it is necessary. I'll see you at 6:30 sharp. Be ready, my darling.' He blew her a kiss and left.

Demetra continued to look at the door stupefied by his abrupt departure.

'Miss Breloff, may I come in?' She heard Brenda's small voice.

'Come, what now?' Demetra was angry again. But this time at herself. She should have been wiser than to offer him that CD with both CCVT on. For sure, Marcus thought she wanted to trap him. He could not possibly leave the building with that CD. How stupid of her. The CD would have been detected by guards. It would have triggered the security system. As for her, she could do it, since she was employed there. The cold sweat, for the second time in the last half hour, covered her up again. Next time I'll be wiser, she promised to herself dropping the CD back into the drawer and thinking on how to retrieve it again and take it with her.

* * *

He arrived in time. Demetra was ready, in a black evening dress with a pearl necklace (relic of her maternal great-grandmother) and high-heeled slippers; she was the image of style itself. Marcus admired her trim figure and long blond hair arranged in an intricate style on top of her head but stated firmly: 'You're the picture of elegance and femininity. I wish I could take you to a place according to your outfit, but we're going to a place where there are different dress codes. You should change into something casual, jeans, T-shirt.' Demetra's face darkened.

'Couldn't you make a reservation at a somewhat better place than a common pub?'

'What do you know about pubs? I thought you prefer French restaurants.' He sounded surprised at her remark.

'I'm not a pub-goer. I know the dress codes of my country. I don't care for pubs. I guess we'll be better dining at home. Here.'

'Oh no. I'll take you to a nice place; you're going to love it. Don't be difficult. Change quickly. I'll wait for you here in this comfortable chair.' Marcus said looking around. Demetra opened her mouth as wanting to contradict him, but closed it instead. She decided she'd save her temper for some other time. Sending him an arrogant glance, she turned on her heels and left the room.

'What a weird place!' Demetra was shocked by "Boar's Head"

the moment they've entered it. She wrinkled her nose at its distasteful (in her opinion) decorations and rough-mannered customers. They took a seat at one of the tables in the rear. Marcus sat with his back to the wall, making her wonder on how many enemies were looking for him so that he chose to sit like that.

'I guess it's the kind of place that suits you the best.' Demetra pointed sarcastically.

'You got it right. It's the only secure place in all Karsland. Here we can talk openly. There is no way to get through the monolithic structure of these walls.' Marcus smiled at his own words.

'What do you mean?' He sensed the note of surprise in her, otherwise, cool tone.

'Here we don't need to worry about Guardians, CCTV and etc. I assure you there is nothing of that sort.' He stated, looking into her face. The arrogant mask covering her beautiful features began to slip away and soon he saw the usual Demetra smiling, mysterious and curious.

'Are you sure of it?' She whispered afraid to be taken for a fool.

'More than sure. Where is your stuff?' Marcus went straight to business. 'Wait a minute,' he warned her at the appearance of the waiter.

'A bottle of your best wine.' Marcus ordered and added: 'we're celebrating something very dear to us.' He winked slightly.

'Yes, boss.' The waiter was impartial to such outbursts. It was not in Karslander's manner to speak about private matters, even with old customers. Demetra looked reproachfully at Marcus.

'All right. I went too far. I forgot I'm not abroad.' He apologised, then began in an agitated voice: 'Goddamn, it looks like there's no living soul left here. Walking corpses! Where are your emotions, girl?' She didn't reply, being too embarrassed by his conduct. Also, she didn't know how to behave in his presence. He was different from everybody she knew. He was an enigma.

The waiter was back with the bottle of wine and two glasses, which he placed on the table silently waiting for the next request.

'Is that all? How about aperitifs?' Marcus lifted his eyebrows. Noting the stupefied expression on the waiter's face, he smiled. 'I've been joking. Let's try your best on the menu.' At those words, the man hastily got a bottle opener from one of his bottomless pockets and with speed of a monkey, uncorked the bottle. He poured some wine into Marcus' glass.

'Is it Italian?' Marcus raised his eyebrows.

'Yes, boss.'

'Thank you. Nothing for the moment. I'll call you.' Marcus dismissed him with the nod. Then he took his glass and brought it closer to his face.

'The aroma is perfect.' He uttered. Lifting his glass high, he looked through it at the light. 'The colour is perfect, Bordeaux.' Then he sipped a small amount and held it in for a few seconds before swallowing.

'The taste is good too.' He concluded his tasting procedure under the loud laughing of Demetra, who found his serious attitude to such a banal thing incongruous.

Ignoring her reaction, he poured some wine to both of them.

'To our great future!' Marcus raised the toast.

'To our health!' Demetra smiled at him. At first, she wanted to refuse the drink, but looking at his happy face, she had no courage to do so.

'Isn't it really good?' Marcus was exhilarated.

'I guess it is. I'm not a wine connoisseur and cannot judge it.' Demetra replied slowly.

'I've heard it from you already.' He sounded almost rude. She looked at him silently.

'Did you bring CD and board?' He asked quite unexpectedly.

'Yes, I did. Isn't it the reason why we're here?'

'You can give it to me now, but do it discreetly, not as in your office.' He said, reminding her about her mistake.

'This time I've prepared it carefully.' She replied. Then she gave

him a thick magazine, which she brought with her. 'It's here.' She said simply.

'Thanks. You're improving. Soon we could work together.' Marcus joked, looking at her directly. She turned her head away quickly as being hurt by his words. He saw her profile. Being an artist, he recognized at once that he was looking at the perfect classical profile. It attracted and repelled him at the same time.

In that moment, Marcus realized that it was the first time in his life he got afraid, afraid of a woman. Of that woman. She made him forget about everything, except her. I must be crazy, he thought and said loudly: 'are you ready for dinner? Can we order?' He picked up one of the menu and held it to her.

'Thanks. I'm not really hungry,' Demetra replied, facing him again. She was smiling now with that strange expression of someone who was not used to alcohol. The wine went to her head, and the entire world seemed to be at her feet. Even this hateful man, as she called him secretly, seemed nice and handsome. And she liked handsome men.

'Oh, no, you're not going to refuse my dinner,' Marcus insisted, seeing Demetra continued sipping the wine, 'you cannot drink on an empty stomach. I'll choose for both.' He motioned to the waiter who hurried to him and ordered what he thought would have pleased her. To his surprise, Demetra didn't show any interest during the choice of courses. It was a good sign, he thought, not knowing she didn't care much for any cuisine.

'I can make this soup at home. Exactly the same,' she stated suddenly after consuming the first course in silence.

'Can you?'

'Why not? I was brought up in a proper family. When my mother used to cook, I helped her. It's not as in the Statedom,' Demetra replied.

'Lucky you. Hundred thousands of others didn't have your opportunity. They're forced to learn to cook from books. You know well, it's not the same.'

'I can't help it. It's not my fault they're lacking of high intellect. I'm not,' she stated haughtily.

'Be glad, you're not. I feel sorry for all these people who never knew a mother's caress.' Marcus decided to continue on the subject. He wanted to get to know better that woman, to know what she thought and did. It looked like Demetra was going to disappoint him.

Never before in her life, had she thought much about Barbò, their life and customs. She was too busy with herself to pay attention to others. Being attracted by him, she got curious to know more about him, his interests and hobbies. If he, Stakhanò, has sided with Barbò, why could she not get some interest in those miserable, lazy creatures too. Anything in order to understand him.

Her head spun up from the wine, she was sure, but maybe not only from it. The longer she sat in front of that man, the more an increasingly persistent thought entered her mind. She wanted him to kiss her and maybe more. She was already too old to feel ashamed at such thought. She'd turned thirty-two in last summer.

In Karsland women were not supposed to have sex until they get married. It was the law and strictly followed by everyone. For Barbò was easy to obey the rules, since they didn't need to spend years and years on studies and could marry at sixteen. Not so for Stakhanò: Stakhanò women, by their status of Superiority, were obliged to study, then to work at least five years and only after that, to marry.

Demetra as any law-obeying citizen always followed the rules and regulations of her country. She never questioned them, wither right or wrong. For the first time in her life, looking at that enigmatic man, she felt sorry for not being able to drop everything and run with him somewhere. And almighty help her afterwards.

'Don't think too much. Eat. Will get cold soon,' Marcus said as reading her thoughts and answering them.

'I thought of nothing, you're wrong.' Demetra got courage to contradict him.

'We'll see about it later,' he ignored her reply continuing to consume the hot dish.

Soup followed by fish, then cheese, fruit and at the end was a strong espresso coffee, which was decisive in Demetra's case. With its last drop, she made up her mind to follow her wish.

'Do you care for a piece of cake? It looks very appetizing.' Marcus seemed of being determined to feed her up.

'No, thanks.' Demetra refused his offer. Marcus sensed her change of mood, but he pretended not to see it. As a good hunter, he knew the time was not ripe yet. He felt he attracted her, but he was more than attracted. He knew he was in love. He wanted her to love him. Not just one day, but always, and forever. He decided to wait until she would be ready to be with him, always and everywhere.

'What's next? I like ice cream. You cannot refuse my wish.' She sounded as a capricious child, but he could read a prohibited desire on her face.

'You can have all that you want to *eat* today. Although, I think it's time to leave now. Our business *is* over. For today.' He cut her short quite unceremoniously. It was the time to run away, unless he might not be able to resist her unspoken desires.

Chapter 8

At the sight of a narrow and deep valley, lost between snow-capped mountains Demetra's heart began to beat faster. The plane was now landing. The ground was getting closer with each passing second, Demetra could clearly see the vast expanse of bluish-green forests and in their midst the bright blue lakes. She could feel the coolness of their clear fresh water and silence of those deserted places, so dear and familiar to her that she could not stop the tears filling her eyes. She spent her best summers there, when she was a teenager and her love for nature grew between the majestic old trees, with trunks so wide that needed at least two persons to enfold them. Then there were the soft touches of landing tires on the ground, smoothing running and, shortly after, a full stop.

Demetra came out of the plane. The landing and waiting areas were just big enough to be used for medium sized planes. The rest was a virgin forest, which was left untouched to preserve its beauty and wealth. Demetra stepped out and stopped for a moment to inhale the fresh air, which was so clean and thin. She looked around for changes but didn't spot any. Nothing was touched nor changed as long as she could remember it. The trees were grown taller and bushes seemed thicker than before, or maybe it looked like it in comparison with the town. She smiled happily in participation seeing her parents. She didn't inform them before hand, deciding to make her unexpected arrival as a surprising present to her mother's birthday, which was in two days.

Her parents lived in Lapland Cave, a small town lying in the middle of the forest at about ten kilometres from the airport and to reach it, Demetra rented a small four-wheel-drive car. In less than half hour of driving, she stopped in front of the main en-

trance. Almost immediately, the door was opened and a woman in her sixties appeared in its frame.

'Mama.' Demetra called her out. Quickly getting out from the vehicle she ran to her.

'Oh, Demetra. You startled us. We didn't expect anyone. When I've noticed the car on the driveway, I thought something had happened.' Elena rushed out and reaching the girl embraced her warmly.

'Fedor, come here. Look who's here.'

'Bring her in,' the father's voice reached them. They went in together.

'Come here, big girl. Let me see how you grew over the past year.' The father was already in the hall. 'You're getting more beautiful with each year.'

'Of course. She's ours and the most beautiful of all.' The mother repeated after him. Then both parents hugged her together. The familiar feeling of complete happiness overwhelmed Demetra, making her feel turmoil of emotion. It was the same at each visit. Being hugged by both of them simultaneously gave her a feeling of complete security, which was so familiar from her childhood and making her regret for having grown up.

'Let's have some tea. She must be tired from her trip.' Her father was the first to break their embrace. Slowly Elena slackened her grip on her daughter's shoulders and, at last, let her go.

'I guess you're right. Go, unpack your things. The tea will be ready shortly.' She agreed reluctantly and turned in the direction of the kitchen.

'I'll help you with your luggage.' The father volunteered, moving to the main door. Demetra followed him.

'What do you have here? You brought with you the "trousseaus". It looks like you came for a long stay, isn't it?' He teased pulling out one of her heavy suitcases from the vehicle.

'I've brought a few things for you. Let's carry it together. It's too heavy for you.'

'What do you think of me? I'm not on my last leg yet.' He protested, continuing his way upstairs.

They ascended to the first floor, which fully belonged to Demetra when she used to live there. The fly of stairs finished in a long corridor, with two doors on each side. It was designed as a separate flat with its sitting room, bedroom, study, dressing room and a bathroom.

The father went directly to the dressing room. He pushed the door open revealing the bright square room. He stepped in and put the suitcase down in the middle of it. Demetra was behind him.

'We'll be waiting for you downstairs. Come quickly, the tea will be ready soon.' He said leaving her alone. As usual, the sight of familiar things made her heart to squeeze.

Demetra sank in a nearby armchair and kicked off her shoes. They fell with a cracked sound on the wooden floor. She did not care. It felt so good to be home again. Reluctantly she rose from her seat and slowly walked around the room. She looked out of the window and the green of the forest was a balm for her spirit. She felt like being filled by everlasting energy from this vast woodland.

Turning her back to the window, Demetra removed her clothes quickly and went to her built-in closet. She pulled both its doors and stepped into it. As everybody in Karsland, Demetra had an extensive wardrobe, which she had split between Viking Wish and her parents' house. She loved having clothes and the more of them, the better, she thought. Although she didn't use most of them, she was happy just to own them. She looked for her favourable navy velvet dressing gown with a cream Belgian lace collar. Finding it in its place, Demetra slipped it on and the feeling of home and security suddenly descended on her. Quickly, she turned to her suitcases and began her unpacking.

As soon as it was over, she went to have a look at her bedroom and then at her study, which was her favourite place. She loved it.

She spent her best hours there between her preferred books and music. She sat at her desk and slowly inspected the room. Her knick-knacks in the curio cabinet seemed to greet her, the tiny porcelain doggy moving his tiny tail. Her doll Masha, in a colourful *sarafan*, smiled at her as saying "welcome home". Demetra's eyes filled with tears as memories of her childhood came back to her, but her grandfather's clock stroke the hour and stopped all her thoughts, reminding her about her parents waiting downstairs. She rose swiftly from her seat and ran to the dressing room to change into her afternoon dress, as it was the custom of the country.

She entered the drawing room, where her mother presided near the table, ready to serve the tea and her father comfortably sat at his favourite corner, on the armchair near the fireplace.

'I began to wonder if you'll ever come down. You know it's difficult to keep the teakettle hot, even at this time of year.' Elena reprimanded her. Demetra smiled, feeling she was at home at last. Her mother was herself as usual.

'I tried to be fast. It took some time to found a suitable dress. I hope you like it.' Light-heartedly Demetra turned around to show herself off.

'It's one of my favourite ones.' Elena smiled at her daughter. She loved for everything to be in order and the sight of Demetra dressed for tea made her happy. No matter how far Demetra lived or how seldom they saw each other, she was still her girl and knew how to please her mother.

* * *

The morning greeted Demetra with the singing of birds and the soothing sound of the famous forest. She left her bed as soon as she awoke, not liking to linger there when the sounds from outside were promising an excellent day. She went to the window and opened the shatters to let the fresh air enter. Inhaling deeply the clean air, she admired the quietness and calmness of her surroundings. The autumn was there already and it was felt in the

coolness of light breeze and the colours of the trees, which ranged to several shades from red to yellow. The morning cold didn't make her change her mind on going out.

Picking up the first sweat suit that caught her eye in her closet, she put it on quickly. Slowly, she opened her door and stepped into the corridor trying not to make any noise. She didn't want to disturb her parents. The house was quiet. Carrying her trainers in her hands, stocking-dressed Demetra silently reached the stairs and began descending. Now and then, some of the wooden steps were cracking under her weight. She stopped and listened for any sounds. Her parents seemed fast asleep. She continued to advance until she reached the entrance door. Putting her trainers on, the girl opened the door and stepped outside. She headed quickly for the forest. She loved her morning forest walks.

That boreal forest was replanted in the beginning of the last century, after one of the most savaging wars. The original one being a part of Earth's lungs was burned down to its roots. That was one of the biggest ecological disasters. If the forest would have not been quickly replaced, an irreparable damage to the Earth's population would have been made, due to a permanent shortage of reproduction of the oxygen, which was already reduced up to 30 per cent after the disappearance of the Amazonian tropical forests.

At last, Demetra reached one of her favourite spots, the small round lake in the middle of the greens. The sun could hardly get through the thick tall trees in the heat of the summer and in the late autumn, it was dark and damp. The sky was somewhere up and the dusk and silence ruled the place. There is just her, the nature and the clear water, reflecting everything surrounding it.

Without rush, she looked around for a right spot to sit on. There still were some patches of dry grass near the thick trunk of a fallen tree. She sat on the ground and leaned at the trunk. After a while, she stretched on the grass looking up. Above her were the wide crowns of majestic trees and between its thick branches the blue

sky could be glimpsed. The girl closed her eyes and memories of her past took over her.

What wish could have a five-year old girl? Everybody would say a lovely doll, or a special trip to an ice cream parlour. But it was not so for Demetra. Her biggest wish was to follow her father in his endless business trips. He was a specialist on vaporization of water, which was one of the most important professions at the time. Over two hundred years ago, began the process of the Earth warming up. At the beginning, nothing was done on warning about it or mentioning, but the possibility of floods in the future. When a few icebergs, each of the size of Greenland, began to melt yearly, and the western parts of Holland and Belgium went under water, widening the gulf between England and Europe and Venice was submersed soon after that, the matter became serious. Still, no one did anything to prevent the coming disaster. The politicians continued their daily games of speeches, becoming richer and richer, industrialists continued to make their money on top of sufferings and the masses continued to count their meagre earnings, trying to meet their ends. Suddenly, the issue of stopping the deluge became the matter.

In addition to the loss of that part of Europe, the melting of the ice produced uninterrupted rains which ruined highways, washed out the soil under many buildings which collapsed, killing thousands of people and those who were lucky to survive, left homeless. It was no longer a matter of what kind of house someone had. It became important to have a roof above the head. Nothing could stop water from coming. The priority of the European Government was to find the solution to that crisis.

Many symposiums, meetings, conferences were held on the subject of water. The most famous scientists were looking for a solution. As usual, it came from unexpected quarters: the small Latin American country - Bolivia. One of the local engineers, who worked on vaporisation of water from salt, came up with

the idea on what to do with vapours. He developed an equipment that separated vapours in its elementary elements, which he regrouped in such a way as to let pure oxygen into the atmosphere, while the rest of the elements created the high organic molecules which cooled to the temperature once formed into white long strips to be kept in underground chambers. His discovery had been lengthy discussed and rejected by many, under false pretences. The case of Maxsoft was still a raw wound in some financial circles and to prevent the repetition of such fiasco, he had been refused to grant a patent, which could make him the richest man on the Earth. After a few more disasters, wars and floods, the World Survival Committee was forced to acknowledge the Bolivian engineer's discovery and issue the patent. A new profession was born: the Water Evaporation Engineer. It was the most prestigious and highly valued field and only the best students could be admitted to the only University, which was located in Bolivia. Bolivian Government held the right to the education of the Chosen ones.

However, there was the other side of the medal. How can one protect the Earth from the shortage of water, which can be created by an extensive use of vaporisation systems? Many conferences were held on that subject, on the abuse of the rights of vaporisation and on the great drought which left millions of people to die as it was in the middle of the twentieth century. Many wars were fought to establish the superiority of water use. Preventive wars were replaced by water wars.

The climate changed drastically. Central Europe didn't have any snow in winter anymore. There was only rain, always rain and the need for Water Evaporation Engineers was on high agenda as it was in the past. Demetra's father was one of those who were lucky enough to be admitted to the University of Bolivia now called "Tesoro Boliviano". Being one of the best-known specialists, he spent his life working in one country after the other. And Demetra?

She remembered her worries for her father, whom she missed so much. How many times she thought that maybe she would never see him again. And when his cheerful voice sounded in the house, her fears disappeared and she could answer to him with the same cheerful laugh. With such lovely memories she fell asleep.

Something suddenly woke her up. She opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was a heavy military boot touching her shoulder. She closed her eyes again thinking she was still dreaming. It was not a dream. The boot pushed her lightly again.

'Stand up. Quickly. It's an OFF LIMITS zone.' She heard the low rough voice.

At those words, she opened her eyes wide but she was so stunned she still could not move any of her limbs. Stupefied, she just stared at the boot.

'Are you deaf? And mute?' The man's loud roaring brought her to her senses.

She jolted up and found herself between two huge men dressed in military field uniforms. Both of them held automatic gun machines typical of an army. What army? Demetra was told from the childhood that Karsland is the only country in the World which had no military troops. No military force. What then?

'Who are you?' She whispered realizing she lost her voice.

'I'm the one who's questioning here. Answer the question: why did you trespass into military zone?' The man, near her, insisted.

'I didn't. How could I know this area was a military zone? I grew up here. I've always came into these woods. There was no military zone here,' she replied.

The men exchanged glances. Demetra noted their hesitation. It gave her some courage.

'I'm visiting my parents. I've arrived from Viking Wish yesterday.' She said firmly, her voice returned by then. 'I'm leaving now. Thanks for the advice. In the future, I won't come here. By the way, where did you hang the sign OFF LIMITS zone?' Without

waiting for a reply, Demetra turned and ran as fast as she could. She didn't care for being detained by them.

* * *

'Don't linger. Everyone is waiting for you.' Elena looked at her daughter.

'I'm almost ready. Just a few more touches.' Demetra begged. She studied herself in the floor-length mirror and liked what she saw there.

That day was her mother's birthday. It would be just a small party of a few closest friends. Although Demetra knew all of them since she was a girl and many of them remembered her as a baby, she still wanted to look at her best in their midst. She knew her parents were proud of her and didn't want to let them down. She chose a white cambric blouse, with long puffed sleeves and a colourful *sarafan*, the traditional long sleeveless dress of Northern countrywomen. To complete her appearance she pleated her hair into two thick plaits and arranged them on the top of her head as a tall crown. Two green combs, one on each side, decorated her hair. She glanced again in the mirror and thought she would charm everyone. She would remind them of their country's origin and customs, which no longer existed in Karsland. All that was left from the past were traditional costumes and some old songs. On the other hand, they seemed to never regret the loss of their land and identity and never tired to worship the State Committee.

'If they're happy, why am I not?' Demetra thought, leaving her room.

As she reached the sitting room, she stopped for a moment to take a breath. She didn't want to present herself as a young blushing girl. She wanted to look cool and composed, a matured adult Stakhanò.

* * *

Next day Demetra went to look for her father who was doing something in the back of the house. She saw him near the apple trees.

'Hi, papa.' Demetra greeted him cheerfully and sat on the wooden bench nearby. The father smiled at her.

'When I see you sitting on this bench, I always remember the time when you were a small girl. I don't think you can understand me now, but I hope it won't take long before you'll marry and have your own children. You'll understand then my feelings for you. We're lucky to have you with us. Many others were cut off from their children. It's a terrible thing although they didn't know about it. When their brains were washed up they really believed what they were told. It's a pity to be born with so little intellectual capabilities.'

'Are you speaking about Barbò?' Demetra shrugged her shoulders.

'Your reaction is wrong. You, as a privileged class, Stakhanò, must pity those poor creatures that are deprived of everything with human value.' Her father was angry.

'I didn't say anything. I just don't care for them. They're not a part of my life.' Demetra retorted. At first, it was Marcus who pitied them and now... her own father is lecturing her for not caring for those Barbò.

'Very bad. You should care. You should think about how it's happened that those poor people, year after year, became more and more dim-witted.'

'Why should I? I've worked all my life, the same as you and mother. I've never had any time for myself. You've said we're members of a privileged class, but I'm no longer sure of it. Excuse me, what kind of privilege is there for somebody who's obliged to work and work only. I'm over thirty, unmarried and I'm so tired of my life that sometimes I want to die.' Demetra muttered swallowing the lump that stuck in her throat.

'Don't say such things. I guess the time has come to tell you the truth about our country. You must know about the past of our family.' She lifted her head in surprise at the seriousness of his tone, wanting to see his face. It was more than serious. It was for-

midable, even grim. The father reached her and set on the bench next to her.

'Last month was the State celebration. You told us about how great it was.' He continued. 'Seventy-five years have passed since the creation of Karsland and the State Committee, and with it everything was changed. The truth is that it wasn't the State Committee who brought the Peace and Prosperity. The State Committee just pretended to do so covering the real thing, which was developed and successfully used to make the Peace.' Fedor stopped for a moment. He removed his glasses and with his fingers rubbed the red stains on both sides of his nose. Then he put the glasses back on and looked at Demetra again.

'My paternal grandfather, your great-grandfather, was a member of the team that developed something successful making it able to improve the life of all of us. The whole team was awarded lavishly for the rest of their lives and it was passed on their children and the children of their children. I guess the State Committee wants to keep a watchful eye on people like you; since you may know about their secrets, it's never wrong to be watchful. I know their secret, my father told me, just as his father told him when the proper time came. Now the time has come for you to know the truth.' Fedor took a brief pause, and then he continued his revelation.

'The special device that was developed was called "*Stimulazer*". It radiated the special waves penetrating the central nerve system of the person, calming him down. That device was incorporated as a microchip into one of the PC boards used in TV circuits. I don't know exactly how. It seemed to work perfectly. The country was full of unsatisfied, violent, unhappy people. Suddenly they all disappeared replaced by pliable, calm and well-mannered ones. How did it happen? Don't ask me. For sure, not by nature. I think with the use of *Stimulazer*, the Rulers succeeded to overpower the population at last.' The father stopped for a moment taking a deep breath. 'Demetra, I want you to be careful. Different people, strangers,

surround you. Do not ever mention the word "*Stimulazer*" if you don't want to get into trouble. What I've told you is top secret. Also, don't ever get into a discussion on subjects which may be regarded as traitorous by the State. Today we may not have prisons or labour camps anymore, but we have powerful drugs, which will reduce you to the lowest level of Barbò. Remember, those medications are legally in use under the pretence of improving somebody's autoimmune system or recuperating his mineral losses. Be careful!'

Demetra was stunned by her father's revelations. They were so unexpected and terrifying that she just sat dumbfound, trying to catch up on its meaning. There was a very sophisticated scientific discovery, which made possible to change the behaviour of masses of people simultaneously. Her father didn't know how it was done but she did. She was sure that the microchip implanted into Thomas's PC board was *Stimulazer*.

'Promise me you'll keep this secret to yourself and reveal it only to your children, when they'll grow up. Of course, they must be Stakhanò as we.' The father said sternly.

'I promise.' Demetra gave her word, still being under the spell of her father's shocking disclosure.

* * *

On her way back to Viking Wish, she had only one thought in her mind: 'What did they use for creating such a power as one that breaks the habits, traditions, mentality built over centuries in just a few years?' Then her thoughts went to another direction: 'No matter what it was, I must speak with Marcus immediately. His ancestor worked with mine. For sure, he knows something. On the other hand, the President himself gave him the job in the State Committee, meaning he, Marcus, is one of the trusted loyal citizens. I might get into trouble, instead of getting help.'

The word "*Stimulazer*" pushed away all other thoughts and only on her way back home Demetra remembered that she wanted to ask her father about the military zone recently created near their house.

She was one of the last to leave the plane. She needed time to prepare herself to face Marcus and find all the right words for their encounter. She walked briskly to control gates and calmly stood between two electronic shields, registering her data. As soon as the green light came on, she stepped out and went to the exit door.

They saw each other simultaneously. Marcus stood in the first row behind a crossing line. It was easy to spot him among others. He smiled happily, waving at her. At the sight of that affectionate welcome and obvious joy shown on his face, Demetra hesitated for a second, deciding to change her attitude towards him, dropping her *faux-naif* and becoming his fiancée in fact. To hell all those laws and regulations, she thought, quickly crossing the distance separating them. Marcus opened his arms and she readily stepped into his embrace. Then almost at once she moved away standing next to him. She would not give him the satisfaction of thinking she missed him too much. At the same time, she didn't care for being accused of indecent behaviour and called to the State Morals Department to attend lessons on the rules of conduct in public places. Just the thought of sitting in front of three disciplinary judges was enough to make her nauseous. A quick embrace was acceptable as a display of emotions, but nothing more than that.

'Disciplinary judges were created by the State Committee.' Demetra thought suddenly, remembering again the conversation with her father.

'Is something wrong?' Marcus looked into her face. But she quickly cast her eyes down. She was afraid he would see her desires and fears. He sensed the change of her attitude towards him, but as a man who spent many years away from Karsland, he could not figure out why she broke their embrace so rapidly. He forgot about the existence of the Morals Department and the rest of institutions connected with it, which he never took seriously in the past anyway.

'No. Everything is fine,' she hurried to reply and added: 'I've missed you.'

'Me too.' He hugged her by the shoulders: 'Let's see to your luggage.'

She freed herself gently from him. He took her by the elbow and, silently, they went to the baggage area.

'I can bet you brought back more than you took with you.' Marcus joked.

'I did.'

'No. Why? You're the only one I know carrying your own luggage. Look around you. No one does. Why kill yourself with heavy suitcases when everything is provided by the State?'

'I just happen to like my own things. I hate starting the trip with a visit to the Clothes Depot. It's not that I like to carry things. It's that I hate the Clothes Depots.'

'All right. Your suitcases are arriving.' Marcus spotted the note on the green display screen.

'Is something wrong?' He asked again, when they were on their way to her house. 'Your face is so sad. You have some bad news?'

'No. I'm just tired.'

'I can see that. But it's written on your face, something is wrong.'

'Leave me alone. I said, I am tired.' Demetra abruptly snapped him.

'OK then, I believed you. How was your trip?' He chose to ignore her mood.

'Fine.'

Marcus glanced at her again. The girl's face was serious and sad. It looked more as she was coming from a funeral than from a birthday party. Her black clothes accentuated the whiteness of her face. She had dark circles under her eyes, which he didn't notice before. Even her hair was in disarray. Some of it got loose from a tight knot on the top of her head, hanging on both sides of her face. She must be worn out, if she didn't care for her looks, he decided.

'Are there any news?' Demetra shifted in her seat.

'Nothing special. I was busy arranging my new office. Miss Brown helped me.'

'I hope you didn't fall in love with that 'blue stocking'.' Demetra teased him.

'Unless she converts into you.' Marcus pinched her slightly and both laughed.

Miss Brown was the same Megan Brown who was working with Alexis, being a spinster, very prim and conservative; she was a constant subject for all kind of jokes. Suddenly Demetra remembered that Miss Brown was one of the most loyal supporters of the State Committee. Her joyful mood disappeared, replaced by concern. 'That old spinster may be dangerous for her or Marcus. Who knows how she could interpret his carelessly dropped words?' she thought.

'Something wrong?' he asked her again noticing the grim lines returning on her face.

'Nothing is wrong. I'm fine.'

'Your face tells me a different story.' Marcus insisted. He decided to press until she would tell him what happened with her.

'Are your folks alright?' He made a guess about her parents.

'They're fine.'

'Damn it, what's wrong with you! You look as a walking shadow. Tell me the truth.' He began to lose his patience.

'Nothing. Don't look for things that are not there,' she replied curtly.

He could not figure out what could be wrong with such a smart and successful woman, unless she was in love and has to suppress her desires. He was sure it was not her case. Unexpectedly, the thought crossed his mind that she looked as if she was terrified of somebody or something. If this was the case, Marcus decided to leave her alone, waiting until she would be ready to disclose her secrets.

* * *

Her father's revelations were burning in her memory. Demetra lost her appetite and sleep and trembled every time, remembering his words: 'the truth is that it wasn't the State Committee who brought the Peace. It's pretence to cover up the real thing, which they used to make the so called Peace.' The real thing was *Stimulazer*.

Poor thing! All her life she lived in the ethereal happiness, contented with everything and thanking her luck for being born Stakhanò. That fateful visit changed everything. It presented her with a priceless gift: to acknowledge such a terrifying secret and to keep it hidden from anyone was too much for her. Having promised to her father to keep his secret, she could not reveal it to Marcus, who noticed that she acted quite strangely. She kept her word and decided to continue to suffer alone.

As days went by, she began to look at her life from a different angle. Slowly, the pride of being one of the few who was granted the life of work was disappearing, replaced by the feeling of being used, discriminated. She always thought that the use of her knowledge, intellect, logical mind and so on for her country, was an honour. Everybody granted to work by the State must feel honoured. It didn't look so anymore. She, Demetra Breloff, is bound to work many hours per day, tired, exhausted, never having time for herself. She, a member of Stakhanò class, who is only ten per cent of the population, is obliged to maintain the Barbò class, the ninety per cent of population. Just because she was born with a high IQ, she had to provide for all of those individuals. To her it sounded as the most vanguard exploitation.

On the other hand, why could Barbò not work? Why should they live an idle life and be supported by others? What's wrong with them? There were no answers to those questions. She wanted to share her thoughts with Marcus, but she could not break the promise made to her father.

Chapter 9

At last, the renovation of his office was completed. The last traces of its former occupant disappeared and contented Marcus was presiding at a formidable oak desk, not much inferior to his boss', Mr Albert Issel. He could have been the happiest man in Karsland but of his worries about Demetra, who was hiding from him, behind an invisible high wall. The phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. He quickly picked up the receiver.

'Hi, I need to speak with you. Could we have lunch together?' It was Alexis.

'What a surprise! At last, my dear brother remembered me. I'd lost hope to see you. Do you know how many times I've called you?' Marcus screamed into the phone and then mimicked somebody: 'Dr Vanderson is busy now. You can leave him a message.'

'Sorry, I was really terribly busy. Now I've got a spare minute and it's for you.' Alexis quickly apologised.

'You're excused but don't try to do it again. I won't be easy next time.'

'Well, in this case I'll pick you up at one o'clock sharp. See you then.' Alexis said and immediately hang the phone.

'What the hell is going on with this boy? Something must be wrong. He didn't show up for so long and then he calls me here. He knows this building is the last place for private calls, unless he forgot about it.' Marcus thought. The knock on the door shifted his thoughts in another direction.

'Come in,' the door opened to admit a short young woman.

'Hi, Marcus, don't you remember me?' She said, smiling at him. At first, he was ready to say "No" but he stopped. He did recognise her. How could he ever forget that Afro hair and blank expression on that round face, covered with thick make-up. After all those years, she

still kept the same style. He quickly rose and stepped to greet her. He could not dare to ignore the President's only daughter, Liz Issel.

'Hi, Liz. You didn't change at all. Attractive and elegant, as usual,' Marcus took her hands into his, 'and grown up into a beautiful woman.'

'Don't make fun of me. I know you don't mean it. In your eyes, I'm ugly and stupid. Barbò.' She retorted rudely.

'And you still got a bad temper,' Marcus laughed. He knew Liz very well. She was always a spoilt brat, noisy and false. Looking at her small stature and girl-like fragility, he wondered about her misleading appearance. Somebody who has never met Miss Liz Issel may think she needed protection and guide, but that was the last thing she could ever need. Liz Issel was a self-determined person, despite of not having inherited the high intellect of her parents, especially of her mother's. She got something else from her ancestors: the precious gift of survival under any conditions.

Being Barbò didn't disturb her as anyone would think, knowing about her upbringings. She could not care less of what people could think about her. She lived her life the way she wanted. One feature prevailed in her character, she presumably inherited it from one of her ancestors, who was burned on the stake as a heretic in the Medieval Spain and it was a quite unpleasant feature: Liz Issel was shameless.

'I went to see papa. He told me you were here. I've decided to pop in to say 'Hello.' Liz began.

'Good. I've recently got back. I went to the party, but I didn't see you.'

'How could you? The old man hides me from everybody. I am his shame, he said. Boo. I am his product. It's his fault; I'm Barbò, not him. I didn't ask him to produce me,' Liz began, stepping on a dangerous ground.

'Tell me, what did you do since you left school? I know you're not married yet. How do you spend your time, apart from watching TV?' Marcus changed the subject swiftly.

'Ah, you know I must watch that hateful TV. I used to think that the system to control us was not existed until they called me twice to their office to reprimand me about my duty. Ever since then, I switch it on and go to the other room. Anyhow I don't feel like I've to do what I'm told.' Liz complained.

'Who are they?' Marcus asked.

'How could I know? They don't tell me their names. They come in long trench coats, identical to the ones from *Casablanca*. Of that you can be sure.'

'I can see you haven't change. Always fighting with someone. How about a boyfriend?' Marcus said and stopped looking innocently at her.

'Which one? I have several.'

'I didn't know. I thought you were already engaged and about to be married. Between us stand ten years of difference in age. I am near forty. You should be in your marriageable age.'

'Of course, I am. I must find the right man for me. I haven't met one yet.' Liz said and added: 'I'm looking for someone like you.'

'Me? Why like me? I never thought I'd be on your preferred list. You can't be serious.' Marcus rejected her proposal with a strained laugh.

'Why not? You're like my papa, reliable, neat and smart.'

'Thanks. I'm not ready for the pension.' Marcus converted her words into a joke but Liz didn't want to stop: 'I've decided to wait for you. I'm ready when you are.'

'It sounded as an old Delta airline ad.' Marcus laughed, but inside he was preoccupied already. He had to get rid of her.

'I'm free for lunch. Let's have it together. In some cosy place. Astoria?' Liz offered, shaking her head slightly. Her red hair was a flame of fire in the bright room's illumination.

'Thanks for the invitation, but it's an unlucky day for me. I have an appointment with my brother.' Marcus said.

'Cancel it. You know you cannot refuse an invitation from the lady. It's one of our country's regulations.' Liz insisted. Marcus

didn't know what do next. If Liz would be difficult, he would have been forced to call off the meeting with Alexis but somehow Marcus didn't believe Liz's threats.

'Well, Liz. Be reasonable. I've spent many years abroad. My brother has something to tell me. I know you're right, but could you make an exception for me? I promise, I'll take you to Astoria myself some other time and we'll have an excellent lunch there.' Marcus tried to persuade her.

'Well, I don't know if I'll agree to this. Knowing you well, I'm sure you'll take your time before I hear from you. I don't want to wait for another seven years before I'll see you again.' Liz began the second round of her game.

'Look, I give you my word that I'll take you out next week.' Marcus repeated firmly seeing she was ready to give up. After all, she was the daughter of the President and who knows, he may need her help someday. Especially when there was something going on and she might be useful.

'All right, my dear. It's settled: I'll phone you as soon as I've seen my brother and have cleared with him his business. Agreed?' Marcus smiled skilfully hiding his resentment. He saw Liz pursing her lips, but soon she smiled at him too.

'I'll be waiting. Don't take too long!' She whispered, but he caught her warning.

'Don't worry, Liz. I'll take you out as promised.'

'Now I'm sure you do. See you.' She turned on her heels and left the room.

Marcus breathed out in relief. He felt lucky to be free of Miss Issel. He had similar encounters with her in the past, but he had always managed to be clear of her due to her age. But now she was no longer a teenager and he had to find out how to escape her in the future. He didn't care for Demetra to find out about Liz. He didn't know how she would take it. For sure, he'd fall down in her eyes if she ever saw him with Liz. Damn it! His self-announcement of their engagement had changed everything. In Karsland

it was unacceptable for a fiancé to be seen with somebody except his future wife. He wondered about Liz's reaction once she'd find out about his engagement. For sure, she didn't know about it, otherwise she would not have come to his office.

Marcus glanced at his wristwatch. It was ten to one. In a split second, he pulled the top drawer out and shovelled into it all that was on the desk. He cared less about breaking or smashing something; the State Committee will always have enough funds to replace everything. Quickly, he glanced around his office assuring that all was in order and then left the room.

'I'll be back at three.' He said passing by Vera's desk, his secretary.

'Do you want me to do something, Mr Vanderson?' She smiled at him.

'Nothing at the moment. Have a nice lunch.' He replied without looking at her.

'I've told you he's engaged. I've heard she's the most beautiful woman. Also, Stakhanò like him. Engineer, they've said.' The woman sitting near Vera whispered to her. Then she added: 'Forget about him. He's too old and smart for you. Turn your heart into another direction.'

'I know you're right. But how lucky I am to work for him.' Vera muttered wistfully.

In the meantime, Marcus reached the ground floor and spotted Alexis who was already waiting for him.

'Well, here you are. Quickly let's go. I've parked at the entrance, hoping I won't need to wait for you.' Alexis said turning to the main door at once. Marcus followed him. They went directly to the car.

'Wow, my little brother is driving such a luxury thing!' Marcus exclaimed taking the passenger's seat. 'I could never believe a hospital doctor could afford it. I wish you could see what poor people are driving in the rest of Europe. They have forgotten how a real car looks. All that you can see there are twenty-thirty years old junk on wheels.' He looked around him examining the rich mahogany leather of the interior.

'What are they doing with their money? Drinking? Gambling? Or buying anything that is offered to them? Are they still so naïve to believe in all that hi-tech progress which have been brought to them?' Alexis asked sarcastically.

'Yap, they are. Don't underestimate them. Many of them have realised the folly of their life and have tried to revolt. Well, it was a good thing to do. In old Europe for each idea there's a law. The law of identity, to brand someone of being racist; the law of tolerance, to brand someone of being homophobic; the law of equality... and so on. There are more laws than there are fish in the ocean. The poor population is afraid to speak. When someone says his point of view they get bombed by mass media, depicted as the worse person in the World, if their opinion is different from others. My dear brother, you don't know how lucky you are to live in this peaceful, free country.' Marcus said, but Alexis read something different on his face.

'We're going to the "Boar's head".' Alexis didn't object to it, driving silently. He had known his brother all his life, but he still was an enigma to him. In that moment more than ever.

'Here we are. I'd thought the ride would have been longer from my office. I can see you know all the short-cuts.' Marcus said, spotting the huge sign of the pub.

'Practice and experience.' Alexis laughed. Then added seriously: 'I've never had enough time to go out in the evening. I often have evening shifts but whenever I can, I go out like anyone else.'

They parked the car and went into the pub.

'Good to see you again.' The manager welcomed them with a broad smile.

'Your place is one of the best for something quick. We don't have too much time today.' Marcus replied, walking directly to the far corner table.

'Just a moment.' The manager nodded to the waiter who ran to them.

'What's the special today?' Marcus asked the man standing pa-

tiently near their table. Without rush, the waiter began to describe them each course of the day. They ordered what was recommended and at last they were left alone. Marcus looked at Alexis: 'Well, my dear brother, what's troubling you?' Alexis glanced around quickly.

'Don't worry. There are no ears here.' Marcus pushed him.

'It's so unusual. I don't know where to start from.'

'Don't worry. Begin from anywhere that's convenient to you.' Marcus was surprised by his brother's reluctance to speak.

At last, after a long pause Alexis seemed to gain some courage. He cleared his throat and began: 'Do you remember when we used to laugh at the Soviets tricks? Do you remember when we read about KGB and how we've never took it seriously? Well, we should have.'

'What do you mean? What KGB has to do with us? I don't see any connection.' Marcus said.

'You'll see. And very soon. Anissia, you've met her at Issel's party, did some digging for me. I mean, she looked through old records and found several articles which you could find of interest.' Alexis said.

'Well?' Marcus prompted him.

'Some articles connected with psychophysics. These, I mean psychophysics, had reached a very high level at the time.' Alexis finished by mumbling.

Hearing this, something clicked in Marcus's mind. He thought about the PC board tested by Demetra and something unusual about it, as she said. What if the mystery of those deaths lied in that PC board?

'I'll look into that case. Good of you to come and tell me about it.' Marcus replied keeping quiet about the PC board business. He didn't want to say anything before he'd find out by himself. 'Here we are.' He changed the subject, at the appearance of the waiter who rolled in their lunch.

'You said it would be short and quick.' Alexis said seeing the amount of food.

'Nothing less than this.' Marcus laughed loud. At his sign, the waiter began to serve them.

'I'm so hungry. Ever since I'm back, all I do is eating. I guess it's the change of climate. What do you think, doctor?'

'It is. But you must watch what you eat. Don't get into trouble by excessive consumption of food.' Alexis was on his horse.

'I want to know more about your findings.' Marcus changed the subject again as soon as the waiter was gone.

'It's here in this file. Don't you think it's dangerous to carry around these documents? I don't like to be in trouble.'

'Here is my brother! I knew when things get real you'd run away as a rabbit from it. Don't worry. I'm one of the managers, personally employed by Mr Issel himself. No one dares to question me, nor search my pockets.' Marcus assured.

'If you say so, in this case take it.' Alexis pushed the file toward Marcus who took it quickly and possessively put his hand on top of it. Noticing Alexis's face, Marcus laughed: 'I'm not going to eat it up. Don't worry.'

'I don't. I have a premonition I won't see it again. Anissia prepared it and I don't know if she'll like it, me giving it to you.'

'Tell her you gave it to her best girlfriend's fiancé.'

'Fiancé? Are you crazy? How did it happen, you didn't tell your own brother about pending matrimony?'

'I didn't. Well, we, I mean, Demetra and I, didn't discuss our future yet.' First time in his life, Marcus stammered.

'I don't understand you at all, my dear oldest brother. It looks like you're trying to act a new piece but didn't memorise your lines yet. I've told you once, you're in Karsland, and here no one plays around with such things as marriage or manners. We're different from the rest of Europe; we're more civilised than they are. The decadency of the Old Europe began in the beginning of the twentieth century. We've passed that period of turmoil and managed to separate ourselves and bring back the best of the seventeenth hundreds, such as manners, splendour of living and so on.' Alexis said passionately.

'I can see it.' Marcus confirmed putting into his words all the sarcasm he could. Then he added: 'If you're so happy here, why do you bother to look for something that may disrupt your perpetual contentment?'

'I'm a doctor. I want to find out the cause of death of that young Barbò. There's nothing more to it.'

'Maybe looking for one thing you'll get the other. Beware of the pitfalls of life.' Marcus warned him and glancing on his wristwatch, he added: 'It's already two thirty. We must rush. I have a meeting with Mr Issel at three. Do you want some dessert or just a cup of coffee?'

'Coffee will be fine.' Marcus waived to the waiter who run to their table immediately.

'This coffee tastes more like barley. Italian coffee is much better.' Marcus commented, sipping the black liquid.

'Marcus, ever since you're back, you've criticized everything. If you're so unhappy, why don't you ask for a new visa and return to your sunny Italy?' Alexis burst out abruptly.

'I'll do that. Let me finish my business here and I'll leave all of you to your *ethereal* happiness. In the meantime, I need your help as well as you need mine.' Marcus stated harshly. Alexis nodded silently recognising that stern feature of Marcus's character, which was so familiar to him.

When they were back in the car, Marcus hugged his younger brother affectionately and whispered into his ear: 'don't take me wrong. I want you to be happy. I'll do my best for you. I'm your brother, and as they saying in old Europe, the blood is thicker than water.'

'I'm alright.' Alexis uttered but his face was still grime.

'I'll call you as soon as I can.' Marcus said.

They continued the ride in silence, hiding from each other their disappointment at the conclusion of their lunch.

* * *

Marcus itched to glance into the file but he forced himself to

postpone it. The coming meeting had to be an important one, especially if the President himself was to be in charge of it. Tucking the precious file into his extravagant briefcase, he went to the twenty-eighth floor.

All doors to the conference hall were wide open and by voices coming from within, he knew there had to be a huge gathering. Marcus entered and stopped for a moment to orient himself between the sea of well-dressed and well-groomed bodies of the cream of Stakhanò society loyal to the State Committee, moving perpetually with a buzzing sound. Quickly glancing around he could not see any familiar faces, except for Miss Megan Brown and Robert Young, who stood near the raised platform. Marcus went directly to them.

'Hi, Marcus. Getting along well with your new job? Need some help?' Robert Young greeted him. His smile was genius; Marcus had no doubts about it. Robert was always nice to the President's protégé.

'Mr Vanderson, I've heard about your assignment. May I congratulate you on your appointment? I'm so glad you're one of us, undeniably.' Miss Brown boomed with joy, Marcus was sure it was real. He was always the favourite of that blue stocking.

'I'll do my best,' he smiled to her.

The bell rang. Everyone rushed to take their seat. Marcus sat in the first row next to Robert Young. It was his first meeting in the conference hall since he had joined them. He read expectation on the faces around him. Suddenly the hall roared with applauses. Marcus looked ahead and saw Mr Albert Issel appearing on the platform through the side door. The small man smiled and gesticulated to calm them down. He reached the speaker stand and put some papers on it. He lifted his head and arrogantly glanced through the hall, above the heads of his employees who continued to applaud without stopping. Ignoring the noise, he took his glasses from the pocket; put it on and as per magic, the silence fell around. Marcus watched this ritual with the amusement of the

newcomer. The President cleared his throat and then began his colourful speech.

'I've brought all of you together today for a very special reason. I've to make an important announcement. I'll be short and to the point. Our survival is in danger. We've someone, alien to us, who dares to destroy our life. We've a criminal among our mist and we must identify and eliminate him. All of you heard about the Barbò who was stabbed. The killer is on large and we must do everything in our power to identify, approach and neutralise that viper who wants to bring us back to the mediaeval age.' Mr Issel stopped to sip some water and clear his throat. Then he continued: 'It isn't the easiest task to fight a common crime but what if is it organised? Today we know nothing about it. To win this, we must get as much information as we can about what's going on. I guess our first task will be to gather all kind of unusual and uncommon gossip or other folk talking. We must have not two, but four ears to hear everything that is said in and out of houses. Anything must be reported and it's the task of Robert's department to sort out what's what.' He moved his head towards his vice-president. 'We're here to serve our country. To make it clean and pure as it was before. I trust you'll do your best.' Mr Issel concluded. His face was purple-red from the exertion and his fingers were trembling, to Marcus's surprise.

The waves of applauses filled the hall again. The real devotion and loyalty was clearly written on everyone's face. Marcus tried his best to be in line with them. It was one of those moments when one's real face could be seen and Marcus didn't care for someone to spot his real feelings. He looked at the President only, not trusting to shift his eyes to meet anybody's.

'Marcus, come here.' Mr Issel's call took him unprepared. He jumped from the seat and moved quickly to the stairs leading to the platform. The President was still standing in the middle of it, near the small tribune.

'Here you are. I've heard about your office. It's perfect, I was

told. It's exactly what I wanted for you.' He warmly welcomed Marcus.

'Thanks. It's quite comfortable.' Marcus's reply was reserved.

'I thought you'll be the right man for a special assignment. Come to my office as soon as this meeting is over. I've something to tell you.' Albert Issel, as a good diplomat, brushed aside his dry reply. Marcus's independent character was well known around.

'Yes, sir.' It was music to his ears to hear the fast and correct response of the younger man. With the corner of his eye, Marcus glimpsed the dark shadow over Robert's face. There's something the vice-president hasn't approved, Marcus thought.

Then he returned to his seat and waited patiently for the end of that strange assembly.

'Who could think such dreadful things may happen in our non-violent country. It's true a human being is never happy, even when he's served with everything free of charge.' Marcus heard behind him the scratchy voice of Miss Brown. She was truly upset by President's news. Marcus pretended not to hear her. He didn't want to get involved into the conversation, concern of not knowing how to get out of it. He continued to sit quietly and look at Mr Issel and Robert Young, who joined the President as soon as he could. They were surrounded by others by now and involved in a vivid discussion.

Soon, the group began to disperse and only a few were left. Then even those left the room. It was time to go, Marcus decided. He wondered what Mr Issel wanted from him. Then he remembered the file held in his hands. He didn't know what to do with it. He didn't dare to leave it in his office, afraid of someone going through his papers and didn't dare to take it with him to Mr Issel either, in case his papers would have been checked by Guardians, just for fun. Then he had a good idea. Without losing precious time, he went directly to old Thomas.

'Good afternoon, Mr Askold.' Marcus's business-like voice was loud enough to be heard by everyone who cared for. 'I've looked

for you. Here is something I'd like you to have a look at once. I'll be back in an hour time to discuss these points marked in red by me.' Marcus opened the first page and quickly wrote: 'Important. Keep it. I'll be back to collect it.'

'Mr Vanderson, I'll do as you wish.' Thomas humbled, keeping his head down.

Chapter 10

It was dark for some time now, but Marcus was still sitting at his desk and staring through the window at the sky, covered with a mirage of stars, that was not so common in that time of year. He was not even looking at them. All his thoughts were on his boss' proposal and he didn't know what to do about it. It was a real dilemma and a dangerous one.

'Well, I know you're in charge of the Marketing Department, which is one of the busiest. Do you think you could handle an extra job such as the collection and classification of all incoming information from our spies? Robert will be in charge of analysing it. I've told him I trust you with this assignment.' The President said and then added: 'I've a lot of people, but no one that I can really trust. Your family took part in creating the State and you should be the one to keep it in order. Recent events had shown us that there is something else going on apart from that common homicide case. We must find out what it is.'

'You can count on me.' Marcus answered, wondering what other events occurred, since he didn't hear anything new.

'You must do classification by yourself. No one should see these files or have access to them. Everything is very confidential. Top secret.' Mr Issel stated seriously.

'I understand that. You don't need to be concerned about your files. They're in good hands.' Marcus assured him.

'I know, my boy.' Issel tapped him lightly on the shoulder. 'Don't worry. Robert will help you. He'll come to your office and explain what's to be done.' Marcus nodded, in silence.

'Go now. It's already late. We'll start "cleaning-up" tomorrow.' Marcus was glad to leave him. He heard the old man chuckling in delight and wondered why.

As soon as Marcus reached his office, he plonked himself into his armchair, dropping carelessly Alexis' file on his desk, and then turned around to face the window. He didn't move since. Mr Issel's offer was every Stakhanò secret wish but as for Marcus, it was a nightmare which put him into a dreadful situation. On one hand, he was overwhelmed by President's display of trust towards him, but on the other he felt apprehensive, realising what impact it could have on his life. For sure, he was not cut for mole's work, he thought.

Then he remembered Alexis's file. It needed to be read too, Marcus thought, suddenly becoming conscious of the end of his carefree life. He had reached the threshold from which he had to choose the road to take, going on with his life. He knew that his future and the future of others would depend on his next step. What a joke the destiny played on him! He, who never has had any interest in being involved with anything concerning politics, economics or married life, found himself to be deep up to the neck with two of the former and contemplating the latter. Demetra, who was a stranger to him just a few months before, who he would never have considered looking at, suddenly became the most important person to him, and the one for whom he cared the most. And Odin? It was the second person that Marcus cared for and didn't want to hurt. How can he manage all those things?

His peaceful and loyal thoughts disappeared after reading the first two pages of Alexis's file: 'The apparently normal, calm, and sound-healthy woman, after speaking for one and half hour on the phone with one of her girlfriends, went to the drawer, took the pistol and shot her husband who was peacefully sleeping on the sofa. There were no reasons to believe they were having problems. The couple was married over twenty years, without children. Neighbours said that few days before the tragedy; a group of people was seen in the area, installing some kind of equipment. It had to be an electrical one, since there were many electrical wires and something resembling loudspeakers.' Then

there were mentioned the torsion generators which were Soviets' top secret. This equipment was designed to radiate certain waves influencing the nerve system and the brain in such way that a normal person could be predisposed to do anything. Marcus was stunned. Could that be where the secret of the State Committee did lay? He stopped, wondering, and then continued reading.

The second case was a description of one of the episodes of a popular TV serial. This particular episode described the influence of rock music on the youngsters and how one of the villains implanted some PC chip to control the brain of those people. Marcus found it quite interesting.

Next page contained some notes on psychology findings. In one of those it was said that the scientific psychology educates public psychology; in other words, information on behaviour and image of the man and its daily conduct modified the public image, making it gradually to change human nature. That happened because we've learned to see ourselves in a new way. Change a man's image of himself and you'll send a jolt reverberating through the foundations of his society. As an indirect influence, psychology can exert by slowly modifying the opinions that every man holds on himself and his neighbours. That was it! Marcus was then convinced that the State Committee used something of the sort to achieve their terrible goals.

'Goddamn it!' He angered suddenly raising abruptly; his armchair pushed violently away, hit the wall. 'They'll know very soon the real me,' he screamed inside, swiftly moving to the door. On his way, he pulled his coat and hat and stopped at once: 'I must be crazy to let them see me like this. Calm down or you'll be finished before you'd start.' Marcus forced himself to put on his coat and his elegant hat. He went back to his desk to put the chair in place. Taking his briefcase, he put in Alexis's file along with other papers and, without rushing, went to the door, not forgetting to switch off the lights. The proper upbringing took over: Stakhanò mentality cannot be destroyed, Alexis's files were right.

He drove absent minded, not really wanting to return to his empty house. Subconsciously, he reached Demetra's house and acting on impulse turned into her driveway. To hell with all that conspiracy! He felt like he had to share his knowledge and who could better understand him than Demetra. She was the one, who tested that chip, wasn't she?

With that thought in mind, he left the car and went to the main door. He pressed the doorbell, two short and one long ring, hoping it was the coded signal for her friends. He was not mistaken.

'Who's there?' He heard her voice. The outside lights came on, illuminating the entrance and the lawn.

'Open the door.' He shouted suddenly getting impatient to get indoors. With all those lights on, some Guardian's car passing by could spot him there and he didn't care for it. At last, he heard the sound of a key turning and the next moment the door opened wide.

'What's happened?' To his big surprise instead of repelling his unexpected arrival, Demetra took him by his hand and pulled him in. As soon as he stepped in, she shut the door and turned to face him.

'Well, what's the matter? When I saw your face, I thought someone died.'

'Almost died. I've had a shock. It's funny; I thought nothing could take me off my balance. I've seen and heard so much in my life I've always thought of myself being immune to anything, whatever it could be. I was wrong. I…' Her hand covered his mouth and her eyes told him not to say anything more. He remembered about the taped walls and the ever-listening State Committee.

'Do you want some tea? Or a drink?'

'I guess a Bloody Mary will do well.' He said.

'I don't have all the ingredients for it. Do you care for a Napoleon?' He raised his eyebrows. Demetra laughed heartily at his gesture.

'French Cognac of course,' she explained. This time was his turn to grin.

'Bring your Cognac. It'll be fine.' Marcus agreed. Without waiting for an invitation, he went to the sofa and plopped on it, stretching his long legs.

He glanced over the room, noting a few pieces of antique furniture: an antique painting in a gold-gilded frame and several porcelain pieces, similar to those he saw in museums in France or England. The draperies were of heavy damask, reaching the floor to protect from the cold.

'Here we are.' Demetra entered, carrying a small tray. She placed it on the coffee table in front of Marcus. 'Help yourself.'

'That's precisely what I need.' He smiled hastily seizing the decanter and pouring some of the ruby liquid into the tumbler.

'To your health!' He lifted his hand holding the glass. Then glancing shortly at Demetra, he swiftly brought it to his lips and drank its contents in one gulp. The liquid burned his throat, but he didn't care for it. He didn't mind anything, just to sweep out from his memory Alexis file, the State Committee and everything that was connected with Karsland, even Karsland itself.

'Are you alright?' He turned on her low voice; she began in the sign language: 'Don't speak anything against the State. Let's go to Thomas. We can speak in his private room.' He nodded. They were lucky; the use of sign language was a requirement in Karsland's education.

'Excellent Cognac! I wonder where you got it.' Marcus said loud feeling slightly dizzy. 'A strong one even. Exactly like Brandy.'

'Oh, no. You can't compare a real Cognac with anything else. It's the most terrible thing to do.' Demetra laughed.

'Let's go see what the old Thomas is up to.' Marcus stood up, towering above her.

'Today you seemed taller than usual.' She teased, taking him by the hand and directing to the back door. She hoped no one could notice them crossing the back lawn instead of the front.

They were lucky again. The light was on in Thomas' kitchen. They ran faster, afraid that the old man might quit the room.

Reaching the door, they knocked simultaneously creating a loud noise, which they wanted to avoid.

The door was opened almost at once and Thomas was there, smiling at them.

'I saw you coming here. None of us is good at sports. I can understand Demetra but as for you, Marcus, it's a shame for you to be so clumsy. I've heard you long before you reached my door. Come in. And don't get offended. May an old man joke sometimes?' He winked stepping aside. Looking guilty, the young couple silently entered the room. Quickly Thomas closed the door and locked all four locks, Marcus counted them. Then he turned to face them.

'You've just read my mind. I was about to visit you, Demetra. You've saved me a trip. Do you want some tea, or coffee, or something stronger?' Thomas looked at each of them.

'I've had my drink already. As for Demetra…' Marcus stopped and looked at her.

'Maybe later. Now we need your help. Could we use your library for a reference? We need to find something.' Demetra said.

'Any time, my library is yours. Anything there is yours.' Thomas opened his arms, taking in everything around them.

'Thanks.' Hastily Demetra grabbed Marcus by the arm and pulled him to follow her. They went to the corridor and into the closet, so well known by them. Marcus stepped in first, followed by Demetra who firmly closed the door behind her and turned to face him. The closet was small but this time there were only two of them and they had more space than they did on their previous visit.

'Well, you wanted to tell me something. I'm listening.' Demetra said without preliminaries. Marcus kept quiet. Demetra lifted her eyebrows in a silent question, prompting him to talk. Various emotions crossed his face. He took a deep breath, and then began.

'You're not mistaken. I needed to talk to someone with whom I could discuss some papers, I've managed to get. On impulse, I

came to you. I wanted to share some details with you. Well, the Cognac calmed me down a bit and I'm no longer so sure about wanting to involve you in such dangerous business,' he said, bending his head to see her face.

'Well, it looks like you've changed your mind, haven't you? At least I didn't make a fool of myself in front of Thomas. What that poor man might think, seeing I locked in this closet together with you,' Demetra replied angrily. Her face reddened and her voice was getting agitated. She was offended by his words.

'I didn't mean to hurt you. It's true I needed someone whom I could trust and speak to. I thought you were the one but… Are you sure, you want to be involved in some things, which can be dangerous? Are you?' He looked at her gravely. Demetra felt he was changing his mind again. Her sixth sense told her he had some information concerning the State.

'You can trust me,' she said simply and slid on a low stool placed near the shelves.

Marcus took the second stool and sat on it as well. They looked at each other for a long time, without saying any words. She read in his eyes readiness to confess, but didn't press him to start. Let him be ready, she thought, I can stay here for an eternity, as long as he is here. At last, he cleared his throat, took her hand into both of his and began.

'I'll try to be short. Today I was given some papers, which you're not able to find in any of our libraries or bookshops. These are classified or commonly speaking, top-secret papers in Karsland. Don't ask how I got them. I did and I've read them. Demetra, do you remember the test you've performed on that old-fashioned PC board? I think I've an answer for you.' He stopped, seeing her eyes opening wide and her full lips parting slightly as to catch his words as he spoke. She was beautiful in that moment; she was the loveliest thing he'd ever saw. He longed to kiss her on the mouth, but he knew it was neither the wrong time nor the right place. He grinned.

'What did you find? Tell me all. I must know the truth.' She insisted, wondering at his smile.

Without more delay, Marcus blurted out that entire he knew. As he spoke, he saw her face changing from red to white and then red again. She seemed to be in a state of high agitation, the same as he was just a half-hour before. It took him by surprise and then he wanted to know why she was so eager to get his news.

'I guess I don't need to take you to secrecy. You're already in this, ever since you've performed that test.' Marcus joked, but his eyes were serious: 'I need to add something more. Mr Issel had appointed me for classifying all information collected by investigators and moles, concerning that murder. Do you remember that case? It looks like our beloved President wants to look into not only the murder, but to check on everybody, including us. He is determined to find something or someone, but I don't know what for, yet.' Demetra was listening to him attentively.

His news was just the proof of what her father had told her. She knew it all without knowing the exact matters. She was agitated, but not as Marcus thought, out of his revelations. In her mind, she was desperately struggling between her loyalty to her father and her wish to share her knowledge about *Stimulazer*. She was in the same situation as Marcus', looking for someone to trust with her information.

'Hell with all, his ancestor was working with mine. Let him share my shame as well,' she made up her mind at last and said loud: 'All that you've just said is the proof of what I was told before.'

'What do you mean?' He was crossed with her at once. He expected to hear anything but that. All of the sudden he recalled the way she acted lately, after her trip. Up until then, he got the strange impression of her being terrorized by something. I should be gentler with her, he thought. He smiled at her, encouraging her to speak.

'Have you ever heard the word "*Stimulazer*"? I don't think so.

It's not in the dictionary. It was given to a special device that was developed to change the world. Of course, it would be a crazy idea to try to change the whole World, but they were satisfied to get just a small area of our Europe as their hideout to implement their achievements. I don't know who, where or why but for sure, someone who was rich and powerful enough paid for extent research on psychology, psychophysics and sociology. They've created that device and succeeded taking over a piece of land and their inhabitants.' Demetra stopped. She didn't need to wonder about his reaction. The astonishment was clearly written on his face. She continued: 'I know one of your ancestors worked on that device, as well as one of mine. It placed us into a special, privileged group of citizen. Now you know why you're invited to the special celebrations at Mr Issel's house yearly.' He was still silent. Demetra caught his heavy breathing and small drops of sweat appearing on his forehead.

He looked like a different person. All his arrogance disappeared. In front of her was a very tired, lonely man who seemed to have reached, at last, after many tiresome attempts, the final line just to find out it was the wrong one and that he had to start over from the beginning, again.

Suddenly, she felt sorry for him. Taking her handkerchief out of her pocket, she wiped the drops of sweat from his forehead. Then she moved it to his cheeks. He covered her hand with his and squeezed it slightly. Up until then, it was the closest thing to a caress she ever received from the man. Marcus was not just a man, he was a man she liked and she didn't feel ashamed of being alone with him.

Sensing her mood, he stood up and pulled her to him. He bent his head and kissed her gently on the lips. He felt her moving closer and bringing her arms around his neck. He kissed her again, but this time it was a real kiss, deep and demanding. Demetra was lost. At last, he let her free. Her head was spinning and she could not stand on her legs. He held her tight, otherwise

she would have slide on the floor. She looked into his eyes and he knew she was his. The knock on the door brought them to reality.

'Well, my dears, I guess you've managed to complete your research for today. Leave something for tomorrow. It's getting too late.' They heard old Thomas behind the door.

At once, Marcus opened the door and the experienced eye of the old man caught the unnatural blush on Demetra's cheeks and her bright red lips. He winked at Marcus: 'I hope your research has only started. I guessed you could continue it tomorrow. My house is yours.'

Without a word, Marcus pulled Thomas into the closet and closed the door.

'We've found the answer to your question. You're right: in this country there are many secrets, hopefully we'll unveil them all. Thanks to you, we've discovered one of the most sinister ones. I cannot tell you about our findings yet, but as soon as possible we'll tell you all.' Marcus informed him at once.

'I knew my Marianna was killed. I knew it from the first moment I saw her dead body. Tell me, have you found out how she was killed?' Thomas was agitated.

'All I can say now is one thing only: you were right, she was killed. How and why we must know more of what's going on here, before we tell you anything else. Be patient.' Marcus said sharply, looking straight into the old man's eyes. Then he added more softly: 'Thomas, I know how you feel. I promise you I'll find her killers. In the meantime, Demetra and I have a lot of work to do. Can we use your closet when we need it?'

'It's yours. I'll give you the key of the back door. You're free to come any time and use my house as yours. Promise me only one thing: be very careful. I don't want to see you end up in prison. Whatever you do, never forget about the watchful eye of the State Committee and the State Guardians at its disposal.'

'Don't worry, we'll be careful.' Demetra repeated his words.

'Go now. I saw a guardian's car passing twice by my house and

yours. I don't know which one they're interested in but I guess it's for the best if we finish for today. Good night!' Thomas insisted opening the door. They stepped out to the corridor and returned to the drawing room.

'Do you have some Cognac?' Marcus asked. Thomas looked at him and went to the portable bar.

'And one for me too.' Demetra said.

'For you?' Both men exclaimed in unison.

'Why not? I may need it more than any of you.' Demetra stated her point.

'Thomas, give her a shot. I guess she needs it. She's had a difficult day.' Marcus said and winked at her. Demetra got angry but stood silent. She knew she needed the drink to calm down the embarrassment she felt then, remembering his kiss and his body close to hers.

Thomas returned with three small shots filled with a dark-golden liquid that reflected light. They took one each. 'To health!' They saluted and each drank their by gulp. Demetra almost choked and began to cough. Marcus took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. Thomas didn't wink. His guests could not guess that ever since Marianna passed away, the old man was drinking every day that strong liquor.

'Poor thing, he must be missing her too much.' Demetra wondered half-hour later, cosily cuddled by Marcus on the sofa. They were back in her house. Many things they wanted to say to each other, but there was no way Marcus could let her speak. He didn't want to give away anything to the State as their conversation would have been revealing. They just sat quietly, both thinking on what would be next and what would be of them and their relationship.

Chapter 11

Several days passed since their encounter at Thomas's house, but Marcus didn't decide to speak with Odin yet. He wanted to take his time before showing all of his cards. He was busy with the new assignment, spending all his days in his office and getting familiar with a new super computer provided for that job. Robert Young and he spent hours and hours in front of that super-modern screen, organising the files by subjects, names, professions and so on for quick filling and finding when required.

'You're the best to work with. Who would've thought? I've never loved bohemian folks, but you're making me change my mind. Are you sure, you're an artist? I'd think you were a born manager and for sure got that degree. Didn't you get it abroad by any chance? There are many places where you can study almost free of charge. You know, all that can help the needing and poor. The Old Europe still believes into those humanitarian things such as helping others, love your neighbour; be honest and loyal. Boo! Our country is the proof of "everything in the past was nonsense". We're living without all that old-fashioned crap and we're definitely better off.' Robert said rising from his chair.

'Thanks for the compliment. I am glad you trust me with your new toy. I'm just concerned about one thing only: how can I remember all these passwords without writing them down? I must write them down and hide the list somewhere.' Marcus pretended to be serious. Robert's face changed at once. A deep concern was written on it. Seeing it, Marcus laughed heartily: 'Don't worry. I'm joking. It's true, I cannot remember all these words now, but after a few days there'll be no need to worry about it. I was joking.' He repeated. Then he pressed a button on his desk. Robert looked at him questionably. The next moment Vera, Marcus's secretary, was at the door.

'Could you bring some coffee, please?' Marcus told to her and then he turned to Robert: 'Do you want some as well?'

'I'd prefer some tea.'

'And one tea. Don't forget some biscuits.' Marcus added, looking at her. The girl's face reddened. She looked embarrassed. 'What's wrong with her now?' Marcus thought, her sight irritated him.

'I'll be back soon.' Vera replied and left the room.

'You're a lucky person. She's already in love with you.' Robert roared with laughter, his fat body shaken rhythmically with each wave.

'If it's so, I must dismiss her. I'm engaged, as you well know. I don't care for being treated as a pariah of Viking Wish.' Marcus cut off at once. He could not allow Robert to treat him as a stupid lad.

'I'm kidding. I didn't mean to offend you. I respect you and Demetra, and wish both of you a lot of happiness. By the way, did you set your wedding day yet?'

'Not yet. But it'll be very soon. We're waiting to hear from her parents.' Marcus replied briskly. Vera reappeared with a large round tray. She placed it on the conference table, in the corner of the office and left them alone.

'That dead man, you remember, the homicide case, the first one in over sixty years, was a well-known person. His name was Gian Longis. He frequented the gym together with some others whom you know very well.' Robert said, sipping his tea. 'Odin Bachter, Demetra works for him, his wife, her girlfriend and even her brother, I mean wife's brother. All of them use to spend their free time there. They're all Barbò, except Odin, of course.' Robert added, studying Marcus's face covertly. Marcus picked up his ears, but didn't let one muscle to twist on his face.

'I don't know any of them personally. Just by names. As of Barbò, I know nothing about Odin's wife.' Marcus revealed.

'I recommend you get closer to them. I want to know more about these people. One of them may be a killer. Anyway, try to get as many information as you can about their doings, hobbies

and so on. You can freely mix with them. Demetra is your ticket to that closed circuit.' Robert added.

'Why "that closed circuit"? What's more unusual about this group than others?' Marcus asked. He got curious.

'One of our moles found out that the dead man was part of this group but he couldn't come closer to them. I need someone who can. Frankly speaking, Marcus, you're the only one who can enter into that circuit and find out if there is someone connected to that murder or not.'

'Of course, if you put it this way, I'll be glad to do what you ask. I'm not a private eye, but I'll try my best to get all information on this case.' Marcus replied placidly.

'Agreed. You'll be rewarded for the extra job. We'll see to it as things will progress.' Robert said biting off a piece of cake. Chewing it slowly, to the big surprise of Marcus who expected such a big man to eat ungraciously, Robert swallowed at last and only then, he added: 'We, I said "we" meaning the State Committee as a whole, wanted you to listen to everything that they might say and tell us if there is anything subversive going on. Personally, I don't believe such things can happen in our country but to be on the safe side, we must watch out for anything that can disturb our serenity.'

'Subversive? What do you mean by that?'

'Treason or rebellion, as it was called in good old times.'

'I could never think it would come to that.'

'Me too. However, we should look into anything unusual. Homicide is unusual for our country.'

'No problem, Bob. I'll do it.' Marcus agreed in a light cheerful voice, but inside him was a hurricane. He placed his empty cup on the tray afraid his hand might shake and Robert may notice it. To his luck, the fat man was taking the second piece of cake and was not looking at him.

'When do you want me to start?' Marcus came straight to the point.

'Anytime, starting now.'

'I may spend hours away from the office. I guess it's expected of me?'

'If you worry about Mr Issel, don't. He has approved your involvement in our enquiry, as well as to be in charge of classified material. You can do whatever you need. You'll be paid anyway.' Robert said and then added: 'As Stakhanò, you must work for your keeping. I said "paid", just to use it as the expression that you've heard and used for the last seven years abroad. "Paid" here means you'll be free to get what you want without registration with our treasury office. Whatever you choose to take from any of our State's shops will be yours forever, no one will ever ask you about it.'

'I wish I could be a woman. I could get whatever jewellery or luxury things I wanted,' Marcus joked, 'but being a man, I don't think I'll get any of the above. May I get something for Demetra?'

'No, that regulation doesn't extend to others. I must remind you, in Karsland there are no tied family bonds. I guess you've forgotten these small rules being abroad for so long. I envy you for it. My childhood wish was to visit Italy. I've never had the chance.' Robert sounded wistfully.

'Who knows what's waiting for us in the future. Your wish may still come true.' Marcus comforted him, hoping after finishing his tea Robert would decide to leave. He was right.

'I guess for today is enough. It's three o'clock already. I need to take care of something. Indeed, we've worked hard over the last few days. I guess we can stop for the moment and wait for some information to come, and then we'll see if our files are arranged in a way that is workable. Anyway, we'll modify our structure, if it's needed.' Robert said rising from his seat.

* * *

'What's wrong? When you called me sounding so desperate, at first I thought you've got some kind of accident. If I knew that you just wanted to know the story of my autopsy on the homicide

case, I'd have completed today's assignment before coming here.' Alexis was disappointed with his older brother.

'Don't complain! What's for you to dedicate one hour to your brother? I could have come here alone. Look around, what a cosy place this is!' Marcus tried to calm down his impatient brother.

Both of them were sitting in one of the pleasant places frequented by Barbò. It was a typical teahouse, with its white riffled curtains and small round tables, covered with white tablecloths reaching the floor. The centrepiece of each table was a vase with a single silk red rose in it. On the walls were several posters of impressionists, with its light and spring colours blending excellently into the surroundings. Various couples occupied most of the tables.

With curiosity, Marcus looked around him. As all Stakhanò, he never really had a lot of time during the day to spend idly, not mentioning everyday's teatime at four o'clock afternoon. Seeing so many people was new for him.

'I wonder, why are there so many of them here?' Marcus asked his brother.

'You didn't answer my question. What are you talking about?' Alexis was irritated.

'Barbò, of course.'

'First, don't speak too loud. They can hear you. It's bad manners to speak loud in public.'

'I don't need comportment lessons. I'm a free man and I speak to my brother as I want.'

'Secondly, you don't need to humiliate them more than they already feel. You know well, they're here because it's time for them to have an afternoon walk. This time of the year, they cannot really have a walk. They came here, same as we, to have tea and chat. Don't you see how polite they are and how boorish you're instead?' Marcus didn't reply. He continued to look around until his eyes fell upon a young couple. A young man of sport complexion and a small young woman, whom Marcus recognised at once,

sat at the table not far from theirs. He had seen her at the plant where Demetra works. He could clearly see that the girl was desperate. Her face was blushing profusely, her eyes darted from one side to the other and her half-opened mouth screamed silently for help. She made a sore picture. The man sat with his back to them and Marcus could not see his face. He had dark shining abundant hair, reaching the collar of his black leather jacket.

'Look, Marcus, I cannot spend my life sitting in this place. I'm a very busy man. If you want to speak to me, I'm listening. If you have nothing to say, I'm going. Anyway, I've an appointment with Anissia. I can't be late.' Alexis appealed to his brother again. But it seemed Marcus didn't hear him. Following the brother's glance, he spotted the couple too.

'Do you know them?' Marcus asked suddenly noting his brother was looking in the same direction.

'No, never seen them in my life.'

'I've met the girl at Demetra's plant, as for the man, I guess he's one of her close acquaintances since she's sitting with him in public. What do you think about it?'

'I think nothing at all. I cannot spend my time studying each Barbò couple. Maybe they're engaged and cannot decide what dress will better suit her.'

'Come on, doc. You should know better than many, a happy bride-to-be doesn't have such a sore face. As my life experience tells me, this girl wants to get rid of that man, and I'll be the one who'll help her.' Marcus sprang from his chair and went in their direction. Alexis tried to stop him but seeing the annoying glances of Barbò decided against.

Reaching their table, Marcus smiled generously at the girl: 'Hi, do you remember me?' He read in her eyes that she did, but she could not admit it. Marcus glanced at the man, waiting for his reaction. He didn't need to wait too long.

'What do you want, man? I didn't invite you here. Just shove off and leave us alone.' The man uttered through his teeth.

'What's wrong with you, boy? I just wanted to greet a girl who works with my future wife. Something wrong with it? I'm Marcus Vanderson and there is my brother Alexis.' Marcus tried to pacify the man who seemed being enraged. He'd never saw Barbò acting such way. It was strange by itself.

'Eric, behave please. I saw Mr Vanderson at my plant. He is the fiancé of Miss Breloff, my supervisor. For sure you've heard about her.' At last, Christina found her voice. At her words, the man calmed down at once. Something resembling a smile covered his face.

'You should have told me about him sooner. How could I know who he is? I thought he'd be one of your admirers.' The man said in a low, husky voice. Their eyes met. The man's light grey eyes were full of naked hate. It was abnormal for Barbò who were usually good mannered, good-humoured and welcoming.

'All right. Let's be friends. I'm Marcus.' He stretched his hand to Eric who took it reluctantly. They shook their hands quickly. Eric withdrew his at once. Marcus put his hand on his knee to dry it covertly; Eric's hand was covered with sweat, the same as his face. Marcus was taken aback by this young man's attitude, behaviour and language, which could never be heard in Karsland. For a second Marcus thought he was somewhere in old Europe.

'How about some more tea?' Marcus offered but his question hung unanswered. A long silence fell around them. Intuitively, Marcus sensed an increase in Eric's hostility to his presence and he decided it was time to return to his own table.

'See you then.' He greeted the couple and left.

'Look, I don't think I'll ever come here again. You're not just boorish as I've told you before, but you're a despicable rogue. That man looked at you, as he wanted to kill you, if I can use such an old-fashioned term speaking of Barbò. I'll bet my bottom dollar, one more minute and he'd have cut your throat.' Alexis was agitated now.

'Look at your face in that mirror. You look no better than that

man does. By the way, his name is Eric. He's a carbon copy of millions others in old Europe.' Marcus stated.

'Are you sure of it?' Alexis could not believe his words.

'Not only sure, but ready to bet my bottom dollar on it.' Marcus confirmed and rose from the table. 'Let's go. I don't need to *hear* about your famous autopsy. I've got some answers already. Sorry, Alexis, I'll explain everything to you later on. Greetings to Anissia. I'll pay.' Marcus grabbed the bill and went to the cashier.

'Is everything alright, sir?' The cashier asked him politely.

'It's the best tea I've ever had in my life.' Marcus replied giving the man his ID batch. The man slid it through the sensing slot registering the bill on Marcus. Registering ID batches was a way to control what was used and by whom. The teahouse, as well as the rest of the commercial enterprises, belonged to the State. Waiting for his ID batch to be returned, a strange thought passed through his mind. First time in his life he wondered where the State managed to get all the money needed for up-keeping half million people, and that after seventy-five years they still had not reached bankruptcy.

* * *

Marcus drove as a crazy, glancing at the clock continuously. He wanted to get to Demetra's workplace before five o'clock to catch her there. In reality, Demetra was just a cover up for him. He wanted to meet Odin and set an appointment with him.

He managed to be at the gate a few minutes before the end of the day. It was good enough for the guards to let him pass. He ran to the building and taking two steps at a time, he reached Demetra's office at the siren's sound. At the entrance of her office, he collided with Brenda, who shivered slightly at his sight. The girl was never comfortable around Marcus, he was sure of it.

'Hi, Brenda. I hope Miss Breloff is still in, isn't she?' He greeted her cheerfully.

'She's busy. Mr Bachter is with her. Today we've got a new order. They're discussing tomorrow's assignment.' Brenda volunteered information.

'I hope I'm not disturbing them.'

'Oh, no. The meeting is over. Mr Bachter let me go home.'

'Good. Have a nice evening.' Marcus bestowed on her his generous smile and crossed the threshold.

'Hi, I'm glad I was able to catch you. I almost missed you.' Marcus said quickly looking at Demetra. Then he turned to Odin. 'You're here as well. Frankly speaking, I wanted to see you too.' He caught the eyes of the man and held them a little longer, hoping to be understood. He didn't need to worry; Odin's next words dispersed his fears. 'It's my luck. I've just thought about you too. You seemed to have disappeared.' Odin turned to Demetra. 'May I steal him for a minute?'

'As long as you need.' Demetra quickly replied. Intuitively, she sensed that Marcus came to speak with Odin. They staggered an excellent scene of slight acquaintance, but she was sure they knew each other well, in spite of having never seen them together before. The two men moved to the other side of her office, turning their backs to the CCTV.

Without losing any time, Marcus reached her testing bench. He moved closer to him one of the writing pads and wrote quickly: 'I need to speak with you. Very important news.' He underlined twice the word "important".

'Your idea is excellent. I myself wanted to do it the same way but slightly different.' Odin replied and wrote on the pad: 'I'll tell D. when and where we'll meet. She's your fiancée. It's OK, I know.'

'Agreed.' Marcus said. He tore off the piece from the pad and folded it many times, then put it into his watch pocket, which he always used for such cases.

They returned to Demetra who stood silently waiting for them.

'Are you ready to go home?' Marcus asked the girl.

'Yes. Follow me with your car. I'll drive mine. We'll meet at my house.' Demetra replied.

Chapter 12

Odin was exhilarated. He almost lost his head at Marcus' revelations and if it was not for Martina's pleadings for calming him down, he would have blown up everything already. He stayed in his house, afraid someone could read the extreme joy on his face and if he was asked why, he will be not able to invent a plausible excuse. It took almost a week for him to accept the truth, although he had sensed it all his life. He had sworn by the name of his mother, whom he never knew, he'd find the truth and at last, he did.

Stimulazer! The top secret lay at his feet. A big dilemma was placed for him by his destiny and he had to decide on what to do. Should he cross his Rubicon and start an open war with the State Committee or should he keep silent, waiting for the right moment to hit the Rulers on their backs? He was smart enough to understand it would have been impossible to hide the preparations for revolt. He'd be in laughing academy as soon as he'd started.

Stimulazer! This was the name of that monstrous device which converted millions of people into obedient and docile robots, in the name of Comocratia. How low some scientists could fall to work on the creation of something which would diminish the mental abilities of the human, instead of increasing them? They would fall lower than that notorious dictator from the twentieth century, Odin thought, trying to remember his name, who used the primitive methods of human extermination until, at least, everybody finally saw him for what he was. But there, in Karsland, was happening something even more sinister and vicious, behind attractive, nice words and spread calm, peaceful life, laid the methodical, calculated and shameless design, aimed at the destruction of human being. Knowing that TV was tampered with high-bio-psycho-technology, he felt sick just thinking about it.

'I'll find a way to let everybody, including babies, to know the truth. I know everybody'll be so dignified that the Rulers will be gone sooner than we think. I promise, in the name of my children, to do everything to change this state to the better, where no one will be treated as a brainless sheep anymore,' Odin swore to himself. Then he called Martina.

'What time did you say Eric was coming?' He asked her. Glancing at her wristwatch she replied: 'Any moment now.'

'I want to speak with him before lunch.' Odin said briskly. Martina lifted her eyebrows at his mood.

The bell rang at last. Odin was in his study, getting through some papers. He heard Martina opening the door and saying something to her brother. Then the sounds of heavy steps getting closer that stopped near the door and finally Odin heard the knocking.

'Come in.' He called and Eric, still his coat on, entered the room.

'Good day. Close the door and seat here.' Odin ordered pointing to the chair in front of his desk.

'Hi.' Eric replied. The perplexity was on his face. 'Martina said you wanted to speak to me.' He took the seat and leaned on the back, facing Odin.

'You should remove your coat coming in here. This room is well heated and you'll be too warm very soon.' Odin said slowly, studying his brother-in-law.

'If you want.' Eric stood up and took off his coat. He hung it on the back of his chair and took his seat again.

'It's better.' Odin was satisfied.

'Well, the name Gian Longis, tells you something?' He asked slowly, studying the young man's face.

'Yap, I knew a guy by this name.' Eric replied lightly. But Odin noticed the expression on his face had changed. He was feeling uneasy.

'Where did you meet him?' Odin continued his interrogation.

'Few times at the gym. He frequented the same gym as all of us.'

'Who's "us"?'

'Martina, Christina, myself and some others.'

'Is Christina the girl who was with you in the Statedom?

'Yes, she is.'

'If you're spending hours together at the gym, I'd think you knew him very well.'

'Alright, I've often met him there.' Eric was forced to admit.

'Why did you say you knew him? Why "knew"?' Odin looked questionably at him.

'Damn it, I knew him very well. He was one of those whom girls like the best. No vices, no jargon, just a perfect body without brains.' Eric was agitated now.

'I wanted to know how things were between the two of you. Do you know what happened to him?' Odin continued imperturbably.

'How should I? We're not pals.'

'You know he died. Do you know how?' Odin stressed on the word "died". At that remark, Eric exploded.

'Why should I? I didn't mix with him as I said. Leave me alone!' Eric screamed.

He jolted from his seat and began to run around like a cornered animal. His face was distorted. Thick sweat was covering his forehead and began to run down his cheeks, down to his neck. He made a terrible picture. Speechless Odin transfixed his glance at Eric, who stunned him by his violent reaction. It was out of any bonds and imagination that Odin could ever imagine. He never cared for the State Committee and everything connected to it, but being born in Karsland, he was not used to explosions of temper, which were normal, or almost normal, in old Europe. Moreover, all of the sudden Odin intuited that Eric was responsible for Gian's death.

'All right, relax. Don't get agitated. I've just asked you a question, hoping you could help me getting an answer. All right, you don't know. Thinking it over, I shouldn't have spoken about it at

all. In each Statedom there are thousands of pupils and for sure you couldn't know them all.' Odin said, in the attempt to calm down his brother-in-law.

He stood up, walked around his desk and reached the young man who was still in a furious mood.

'Look, here, if I'd think you were in some way involved into that case, I would never speak to you about it. Do you agree with me?' Odin rested his hand on Eric's shoulder.

'Yes, I do.' Eric nodded, getting quieter. His face changed into his usual. He swept the profuse sweat from his face and neck. Odin removed his hand from the shoulder and went to the window to look at the sky. He was now sure Eric was involved in the murder of Gian Longis, but he didn't know how. He didn't want Eric to feel wary against him. Eric was a member of the Underground Movement. It was the wrong time for a murder investigation. It was better for that case to be dropped for that day.

'Let's go to the dining room. I'm sure Martina is ready to serve us one of her delicious meals. Don't think too much about it. Forget about our conversation. You're my brother-in-law and my comrade in the fighting against injustice.' Odin said and turned to the door. Eric followed him silently.

* * *

It was a cool sunny day, one of those in the middle December, which are so rare at that time of the year. The icy rain had been falling all night, but then it stopped and to everybody's surprise, the sun broke through the thick white clouds, shining bright and reflecting on the wet asphalt.

Demetra stood near the window not being able to shift her eyes from the picturesque view that opened to her. That day she didn't go to work. There was no problem in missing one or two working days. She didn't need to bring any certificates from the doctor. Her word was enough and in any case, there were always people watching other Stakhanò. If she pleaded a rest, it meant she needed one. And she needed indeed.

Ten days had passed since Marcus had a meeting with Odin, but none of them spoke or mentioned anything to her. It looked like there were no revelations and all that went down, was just a dream. She waited for Marcus to show up eventually, but even he had disappeared somewhere. Demetra continued to go on with her life as usual. Outwardly, she was reserved, calmed and composed. No one could ever guess that she was anxious and worried to her death.

On the eleventh day she collapsed. The night before she'd called her parents. Fedor, her father, picked up the receiver and hearing her voice, he said in a voice devoid of any emotion: 'I'm glad you called us. Thanks for the call. We're all right. Don't worry. I'll call you next time. Good night.' And he'd hung the receiver. Demetra was shocked. It was the first time in her life that her father was so cool and formal with her. She knew that many Stakhanò, as well as Barbò, were very formal with their own parents, but it was not Demetra's case. She'd got so upset that after thinking about it for several hours, she began to cry and could not stop. She remembered her happy childhood and school days, her graduation from the University. The happy faces of her parents, printed forever in her memory. She could not figure out what had gone wrong. The only thing that could have made her father behave as he did, could have been herself, or better to say, her breaking the word given to her father. That stupid *Stimulazer* again. Somehow, he had found out she told his secret to Marcus. But how could he, living in the most remote area of the country? There had to be something there, Demetra thought. She continued to cry. After passing a sleepless night, she was so miserable and desperate that she knew she was not in condition to face no one that day. She stayed at home, desperately needing somebody to share her anxiety with. She thought about Anissia, but was not sure on involving her into that awful *Stimulazer* business.

Demetra glanced at the blue sky again, as asking for help. Then she slowly shifted her eyes and to her big surprise, spotted

a strange car, not so far from her house. There was really nothing strange about that car. It was one of millions Opel made cars, which was the most commonly used in Karsland. However, this one did not move. It was parked and its windshield had darkened glass, which was prohibited for Stakhanò. It had to be the Guardians, Demetra thought. But why? She recoiled from the window, pulling the curtains to shut out the dreadful view. She went to the sofa and lay on it. She wanted to think of nothing. But she was afraid. Intuitively, she sensed she was the one whom they were watching. Although, it could have been Thomas. Wasn't he the one who took that PC chip from his laboratory? If it was so, she was the one who tested it and Marcus was helping in disposing of it. Goddamn all that business! She had a quiet, nice life just a few months before. All started at that party at Issel's house, when she met Marcus who was responsible for all that turmoil in which she then found herself. She jolted from the loud sound of the bell. Jumping from the sofa, Demetra ran to the main door and looked through the glass mounted on its side. She saw Anissia. Quickly, she opened the door.

'What a luck you're here. Come in quickly.' She exclaimed stepping aside.

'I called your office and was told you're not in. I've decided to drop by to see if you're home. Are you ill? You look quite pale.' Anissia said stepping in. Demetra closed the door hastily and locked it on all locks, including the chain.

'What's wrong? I've never saw you locking the door as today. I cannot even remember last time I saw you locking it at all.' Anissia was surprised. Demetra put a finger to her mouth in the gesture of keeping silent. Then she answered in the sign language: 'Don't speak. Someone is watching my house. If you don't believe, look through the window yourself. Be careful they don't spot you.'

'Why?' Anissia's white face covered with red stains. Slowly she reached a window and peeped out cautiously. Almost at once, she withdrew her face, whiter than before.

'You're right, the car is there. We cannot stay here. Let's go to my house.'

'Your house is not better than mine.' Demetra signed to her.

'You're wrong. I'll explain all to you later on.' Anissia contradicted and then said loud: 'you look so pale, Demetra. I think we should take a walk. You'll feel better when you'll breathe some fresh clean air. Let's go together. I know one of the cosiest places. I'll wait for you. Be quick.' Demetra run to her bedroom to prepare herself for going out.

'Now tell me everything that's happened to you.' Anissia said.

The girls were sitting in the linen closet in Anissia's house. Suddenly Demetra began to laugh loudly until she choked and coughed violently. Anissia slapped her on the back. Demetra could not stop coughing.

'Wait, I'll bring you some water.' Anissia said and went to fetch a glass. She was back with a tall goblet, filled to the rim.

'I'll hold it. You'll drink.' Anissia brought the goblet to Demetra's lips that greedily drank its contents.

'Not so fast. Slow or you'll begin to cough again.' Anissia said.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to do it. But it seemed like I'm entertained in closets only.'

'What do you mean?' Anissia asked slowly.

'Nothing.' Demetra cursed herself for her big mouth. She almost blurted out Thomas's secret. Anissia looked at her strangely and then she began to speak.

'I want to tell you something very important. We've never had secrets between us and I don't want it to be otherwise. I don't need a secret oath from you. I trust you as do to myself. I've a feeling we both know a few important things. Over the last few months, we didn't see each other often, being busy with our works. I've heard you've been engaged with Marcus, but I didn't ask you about it, waiting until you'd tell me yourself. You didn't. I did some research for Alexis, Marcus's brother, and found out a lot of strange and extraordinary information. I want to share it

with you. I cannot keep it to myself.' Then Anissia told Demetra all that she, Demetra, knew already from Marcus. Demetra was quiet not wanting to betray him. For sure, she had to be honest with her girlfriend and tell her that she knew it all already, but on the other side; she didn't want to involve Marcus. She pretended to be surprised but Anissia didn't buy her reaction.

'You cannot cheat me, Demetra. We grew up together and spent much more time in each other's company than with our parents. Tell me the truth, you already knew about my findings, didn't you?' Anissia looked into her eyes. Demetra read in hers plea to their friendship, or much more, their sisterhood. Both of them regarded the other as a sister. Demetra knew she could not let down the only close person she had for so long. She felt intuitively that Anissia could never betray her; just the opposite, she'd stand by her in difficult times. Demetra decided to take her chance.

'You know me better than I know myself.' Demetra started. Then she said: 'you're right, I already knew about your research and your findings. Someone who was shocked by its contents told me all about it.'

'I don't ask you who it was. I told to Alexis only. In his turn, he could have told only another person, his brother. Am I right?' Anissia asked quickly. Demetra didn't reply, but Anissia read in her eyes that she was right.

'How did you convert this closet into a soundproof room?' She changed the subject.

'I've inherited it from its former occupant.'

'Did you?'

'Yes, I did.' Anissia sounded firm and slightly disappointed.

'And where is now its former occupant?' Demetra continued her assault.

'How should I know?'

'Not only should you. You must know what's happened to that poor thing who stayed here before. Maybe after the discovery of this hiding place, the guardians took him by force and put into

one of the laughing academies.' Demetra suggested seriously remembering her conversation with her father. Anissia paled suddenly. Seeing the panic in the girl's eyes, Demetra softened at once.

'How did you find out the closet was soundproof?' Demetra asked carefully.

'By chance. It was a small empty room, with the old paint chipped in several places. Originally, this closet was a linen one. I've decided to install shelves. Before calling somebody to do a carpentering work, I've decided to make a new plan and, by stepping in I realised I couldn't hear the music that was on. I could hear nothing at all. It was a strange feeling to be in here alone and it was so silent. I scrubbed some paint on one of the walls and reached the metal. I scrubbed more and found out it was one solid piece of metal, it seemed thick, fully covering the wall. I assumed it was the same with the other three.' Anissia stopped and then joked: 'I've decided I don't need a linen room after all, but a private drawing room will do well for the entertainment of my closest friends.' She winked at Demetra.

'Oh, you're a little cheat. Looking at your innocent face and timid manners who would think that behind them can hides such a witty, crafty lynx. Don't tell me you didn't bring Alexis here to handle your notes?' Demetra laughed now.

'I did. I didn't have enough guts to give him those papers in front of others. Who knows how many spies are employed in the library?'

'I've never thought about such persons before. I must be fully stupid, not paying attention to what's going on around me.' Demetra lamented.

'I'm not surprised at all. With your kind of job, you have no chance to neither see nor hear people. Your machinery, as sophisticated as it is, cannot replace the human beings with their complaints and problems.'

'I've never thought Barbò could have problems. What do they

want more? Years ago, they worked ten-twelve hours per day for a few pennies, then for a long time eight hours per day for a minimum salary. Since the creation of our country, they haven't been working at all.' Demetra contradicted.

'You'd think so. However, if you could hear them, you would change your opinion. I'm lecturing at the University and I've met hundreds and hundreds of people of various backgrounds. Many of them had Barbò parents and I've heard enough not to envy their life.' Anissia added.

'I don't care much about Barbò. It's not that I don't like them. I just don't care for those people. I don't know any. I've never been close to any of them. I just have no time for them. I hardly have time for myself.' Demetra confessed.

'It's OK. No one will blame you for it. You're an excellent example of the perfect Stakhanò. Karsland needs such persons: loyal, faithful, minding your business only.' Anissia said. Glancing at her wristwatch, she stood up at once.

'It's almost twelve. We've been here over an hour. It's almost lunchtime. Let me prepare something for us to eat. Let's speak about your trouble, I mean, the spying on your house, after the meal.' With those words, she opened the door and stepped out. Demetra followed her obediently.

None of them dared to speak first, being afraid to sound falsely. Anissia put on some music. A popular song filled the house, dispersing the gloom felt by the girls. They went to the kitchen.

'Do you care for a chicken leg or a beef chop?' Anissia asked opening the refrigerator.

'Of course, beef. You know I love meat.'

'Chicken is meat too.'

'I know, but I prefer the other.'

'And as a side dish?'

'Just one tomato. Nothing more.' Demetra said.

'I guess I'll take the same.' Anissia said removing two small packs. She put them on top of the counter and unfolded. Looking

almost with love at the two neatly prepared pieces of meat, she said gloomy: 'Barbò are vegetarians.'

'Well? It was their choice. As you remember from the school, it was a long and tiresome campaign ran by the State to convert them. It was a big success; eighty five per cent of Barbò population gave up their antique habits for the sake of living in harmony with Nature, as they told. I love my meat.' Demetra concluded.

'I wonder how their body adjusted to the luck of animal iron, which could be got from consumption of meat.' Anissia added.

'Who knows?' Demetra's thoughts moved in another direction, bringing back the worries of the past days.

As soon as they were finished with coffee, the girls were back into the closet where this time was the turn for Demetra to speak.

'You're my closest person. I wish to tell you everything that's worrying me but I gave my word to be silent. I'm afraid of the Guardians, we saw today on my street, watching my house. I wish I could find out why.' Demetra said looking into Anissia's eyes.

'If you want I could try to do it for you.' Anissia said simply.

'You? How? You don't know anybody at the State Committee.' Demetra was astonished.

'You're wrong. Did you forget the Issel's party? Do you remember I was there? With whom?' Anissia's eyes got bigger.

'Robert Young?' It was Demetra's turn to get bigger eyes.

'Yes, him. A few months ago, he came to our library. He saw me there and from that day, I've never been free from him. I've always wanted to cut him off, but every time I was ready to, something inside prevented me to do so. That hideous party, I'll remember it until I'll die. I'll never be able to forget Alexis's face when he saw me there. It gave me a shock. But how could I know that he'd be there? On my enquiry about guests, Robert said there would have been only a few Chosen. How could I know that the Vandersons were Chosen Ones?' Anissia confessed, dropping her head low to hide her tear-filled eyes.

'Take it easy, Anissia, please. You cannot be weak now. I know

Alexis is your choice. If you're his, he'll forgive your *faux pas*. I'm sure he already did. You've mentioned earlier he was here, haven't you? If it's so, everything is already forgotten.'

'I hope you're right.'

'I'm always right, as you said many years ago.' Demetra reminded her.

'Frankly speaking, I thought of getting some news through Robert.' Anissia said suddenly.

'He's too smart. I don't think we can use him. He looks carefree, but he's not. If that little wizard, Issel, in-trusted the most important Department of the State such as Security, I'm sure Robert is methodical, logical, organised and tough, not mentioning of noxious, iniquitous and devious.' Demetra summed up the man.

'I'm not a stupid either. My work at the University was an excellent exercise at studying people. Don't forget the classical antique literature is called so not for nothing. Our ancestors were the wise and smart people. They left us an enormous treasure, which is lost to us in our country. That treasure was the art of survival. I'm glad I've read about it and may use their methods if needed.' Anissia stated determinately.

'I'd wait if I were you. Don't do anything rush. Promise me you'll wait till I'll tell you what to do.' Demetra's voice was full of anxiety. She didn't care for Anissia's ideas.

'You want to tell me there are some people who could use my acquaintance with Robert for their interests? Tell me. I want to be part of that group.' Anissia's reply was a bombshell to her.

'You misunderstood me. I didn't say I knew some people. I just worry about you. Let me speak with Marcus, I'm not sure if he'll approve your rendezvous with Robert.' Demetra explained.

'Of course, you're secretive as usual. You've always been. I'm closing my eyes on your behaviour because I think we growing up together are more important than anything else.' Anissia muttered suddenly. The sad expression on her face pained Demetra

who still preferred to keep away the existence of *Stimulazer* from the girl.

'I didn't mean to sound so harsh but truly, Demetra, you've changed so much over the last few years. I hardly ever see you anymore.' Anissia hugged her affectionately.

'I know. My work is killing me. I don't know how long I can continue with such life. Too much stress. Too much demand. His superiors press my boss, and he's pressing us in his turn. I wonder if it's worth to be a Stakhanò.'

'Don't say such things. Whatever we do, it's always better than to spend each day watching TV. Its true Barbò are unique on creating hobbies, but I still find it boring to watch for hours a butterfly and study its movements, or stay around the clock in the kitchen inventing new gourmet dishes in the hope of winning contests for the best cook of the Year. Wow.' Anissia shivered.

'It seems there's nothing perfect in this world. Let's get together more often as we did today. We should meet without waiting for some exceptional circumstances.' Demetra added.

'We'll do that.'

'I guess it's time to go home. I don't think it's a good idea to stay here overnight. Marcus may call me. I haven't seen him for several days.' Demetra said.

'I guess you're right. I'm not going to hold you. Don't think too much about that car outside your house. They can do nothing to you. Maybe they've decided to watch all the Chosen, some kind of protection. Who knows, maybe there is some bomb-threat? We've already got that murder, now may come the time for bombings.' Anissia joked.

'Don't kid with such things. You never know, nowadays.' Demetra took the bombing story seriously.

They left the closet and went to the back door. On their way, Demetra glanced through the street and stopped abruptly. Being behind, Anissia bumped into her.

'What's wrong now?' She began but didn't finish. Demetra, who

turned around speedily, clapped her hand on the mouth. Her eyes moved in the direction of the window. Anissia pulled her hand away gently understanding Demetra's gesture. Slowly, she moved closer to the window and looked out. At once, she saw the same car, maybe not the Guardians's that was parked earlier near Demetra's house.

'Goddamn it.' She cursed involuntarily. Both of them returned to the sitting room.

'Could I have some tea, please?' Demetra asked suddenly. Anissia caught the meaning of it. For the next few hours, the Guardians should have been contented. They were following the typical social talk of Stakhanò, when they met together for tea or some table game, such as a chess or dame. The playing cards were outlawed soon after the creation of the State.

Demetra was home at five o'clock. No messages left for her on the answering machine. She wished cellular phones were not prohibited and the good old-fashioned Internet was still on. *The State Security closed all wireless communications*, as soon as the State was created, *explaining their gesture as wanting to remove the source of electromagnetic pollution in preservation of the health of population*. For sure, Barbò *believed* into such rubbish. Demetra knew why they did it. To assure the perfect work of *Stimulazer*.

She went to her bedroom and lay on top of the bedspread, trying to think of nothing and waiting for something to come.

Chapter 13

Marcus noticed the Guardians' car near his house on the same morning as Demetra did. Contrary to her reaction, he didn't panic at all. Quickly he summed up his doings and concluded that his house was watched due to his work on the classification of informer's files. The easy-going character of Marcus was well known and his paintings were hanged on the walls of Mr Issel's office. It was enough to exclude him from any suspicion. Whistling under his nose, he left his house through the main door. He raised his face to study the sky, and then he lifted his arm greeting anybody he knew and went to his car, which he left on his driveway on the previous night, not bothering to move it into the garage, knowing well it was against car-user regulations.

The first thing Marcus noticed entering his office, was a bulk of various CD-ROM piled up on his desk. Placing his briefcase on the conference table (he couldn't dare to put it on the floor since it was an object very precious that many envied, made of real alligator skin which he brought from abroad). He then sat at his desk and pressed the button. Almost immediately, Vera appeared.

'What's this?' He asked her briskly, pointing at the CD's.

'I don't know, Mr Vanderson. When I came in earlier with your mail, I found these were on your desk already. Your mail I left on the table.' Vera said quickly, pointing out to the conference area. He sensed her apprehension.

'Well, since you, my secretary, cannot tell me what's going on in my office during my absence, I must find somebody who can. You can go now,' he stated harshly.

'If you need me, I'll be in my office,' she whispered and ran from the room.

'I should be gentler with her. She's a good girl.' He thought

looking at the door which just closed behind her and was irritated at himself for his behaviour, but he knew it was the only way to shut the big mouths of the State, the "Big Brother" was watching him *ad infinitum*.

Then he shifted his eyes at the pile in front of him. There were about forty, he estimated by eye, CD-ROM of different colours. It looked like different persons hastily threw them on the desk. Several weeks had passed since Robert and he had prepared everything for incoming information, and Marcus began to believe they'd prepared the PC for nothing. Finding those CD-ROMs on his desk was quite a surprising discovery for him.

He rose from his seat, took off his overcoat and hanged it on the coat-stand, an elaborate mahogany piece that was assigned to him by Robert Young as a welcoming present. He placed his sable-trimmed hat on its top shelf carefully; he had brought it from abroad as well. No exclusive furs were allowed in Karsland, regarding it as a sign of cruelty to rare animals. Quickly, he was back at his desk, feeling more energetic with each movement.

He moved to the left, where that ultra-modern computer was specifically prepared for such work and switched it on. When it was ready, he picked up one of the CD-ROM and inserted it into the slot. The strange loud voice startled him. Quickly, Marcus reduced the volume and listened to somebody's conversation. At the same time, he could read it on screen. It was just a piece of conversation, without beginning or end. He read: 'It's incredible! How could they design such a thing? It's clear now why they're never tired to remind us about watching TV. I've watched it anyway. Sometimes, I wondered why every morning, when I switched my radio on, the first thing that I heard was a reminder to watch TV. It's no wonder they're concerned about us watching this thing. It looks like they cared about themselves but not us, just as I've always thought.' The polite voice of Barbò sounded disappointed.

'I was told that thing is called *Stimulazer*. I didn't understand

how it works. I only know it's inside the TV and we're duped by it. They dared to pull the wool over our eyes.' The harsh low voice said.

'Duped? Don't use such language. You know we avoid the use of jargon. It's for Stakhanò.' The polite voice was dignified.

'I agree with you. But I'm so shocked by this news I forgot my manners. I apologise sincerely.' The harsh voice said and tape was off. With trembling hands, Marcus removed the CD and placed it separately from the others.

He took the second one and inserted it into the slot. He pressed Enter.

At the beginning, there was jazz music and the sound of many voices. Marcus guessed it had been recorded in one of the ballrooms frequented by Barbò.

'I was told it can damage my brain. I don't dare to speak about it, even if I know no one is listening, but it's so terrible that it's better to let it be.' He heard the whispering of a female voice, which seemed of being afraid of something.

'Why not? If it's true, we must demand to be free of their tricks. My ancestors died in a Gulag and I don't want to live under their dictatorship. I'll be glad to help clear up all these secrets. It's like the opening of KGB files, isn't it?' The highly pitched female voice contradicted.

'I don't care for losing my quite and comfortable life, which I was born into. I don't.' He could hardly hear the whisper of the first female. Then there was music again. Marcus stopped the CD.

Then he took the third one to listen and at the sound of the low husky voice, he almost jumped from his chair.

'I'm telling you it's the truth. It comes from reliable sources. This thing is a tomb for us. I stopped watching TV when I noticed they were telling me to do it. I felt there had to be something up. Today I know for sure, they've made robots out of us, worst than slaves. We're just obedient, brainless marionettes

whom they pull on their spider strings. You know why they did it. To cover up their dirty tricks. I know everything about their schemes.' The voice was too familiar for not being recognised: it was Eric, Marcus was sure. He stopped the CD and got it out of the slot. Holding it in his hand, he reclined in his chair. Looking at the ceiling, he didn't see anything but the naked hate in Eric's eyes of steel.

Stimulazer! It was out already. He would have never imagined it could be spread so quickly, especially among Barbò. How did Odin manage to spread the news? It was a mystery. Nevertheless, it was a fact that in ten days time such job was done and every Barbò was informed and they were already talking about it on the streets. Well, Barbò were the most naïve people that were ever born on Earth. Taking everything for true, so used to obey without questioning, they'd lost the touch with reality. Barbò sincerely believed that the State was good to them, due to their hard past and the idea of someone spying on them could have been taken as a big joke. Funny thing! Nothing changed over the centuries. Intellectuals must investigate, find out what's right or wrong and then bring it to the masses, Barbò, for judgement. Marcus's attitude towards Barbò was similar to that of Demetra, with the only difference that having travelled to the Old Europe he knew well what one could expect from the furious masses. One thing is to see the riots on TV, screened by censure and another is to witness them with one's eyes. On that point Marcus agreed with Odin, who was sure that as soon as Barbò would find out about *Stimulazer*, they'd unite against the State.

That was why Marcus was satisfied by Barbò's response. It looked, as there was an easy way to overthrow the State Committee. 'Well, it's just the beginning. I'm sure it won't take too long to change the Rulers and bring a new order to this country.' He presumed.

Then his glance fell on the CD, he continued to hold in his hand. This was the other thing he wanted to investigate by himself: he'd

decided to find out everything that he could about this Eric. Who he was and why did he speak so authoritatively. Marcus put the CD into one of his breast pockets. There was time to give it to Robert. Then he cancelled that CD file from the disk.

* * *

'Good afternoon.' Demetra met him coolly.

That day was the first day she had returned to her office after three days of absence. She still was not well but she could not stay at home forever without having someone reporting on her. Two, three days were acceptable, but not more. She forced herself to calm down, and nothing could be read on her smiling face. All her attempts to behave normally became vain the moment she laid her eyes on Marcus, who entered her office humming low one of the popular motives. His contented, calm and happy face made her boil inside, but she checked her temper.

'I thought we'd do something together today.' He said casually, as there was nothing wrong between them and he had seen her just the day before. It looked like it had not been two anguish weeks following his unexplainable disappearance, which Demetra spent without knowing what to expect.

'I'm busy today.' She refused his offer.

'How about tomorrow?'

'We'll see.' She replied vaguely.

'Do you mind showing me your plant? I've always wanted to visit a real industrial plant, but never have had a chance. I guess today it's a good day for visitors, isn't it?'

'Maybe. Although I don't see the reason for you to do it. Occasionally, we have a group of students, but it's organised through our administration. I don't know if it's acceptable to bring somebody without their approval.' Demetra hesitated.

'Don't over think it. Hand me one of those white smocks.' Marcus said turning in the direction of her closet. 'I'm sure you must have one for your visitors.'

He pulled the handle and the door opened wide showing a va-

riety of overalls, white and dark blue, and several white smocks looking all the same, as the one Demetra had on. He chose the biggest one. Quickly, Marcus put the smock on and looked at the girl: 'Let's go.' Seeing her hesitation, he took her by the hand and pulled her to his chest. Hugging her affectionately, he kissed her on her hair and whispered so low that she could hardly hear him.

'Demetra, I care for you. Too much. I want to be with you. I know it was wrong of me to be away for so many days, but I had no other choice. Forgive me for leaving you alone. I'll try to be with you more often in the future. But now we must go. I need to find that girl who works for you. She must answer to some of my questions.' Marcus placed a light kiss on her forehead and let her free. Demetra remained silent. She was too stunned by his alien behaviour, his impulsiveness, rudeness, appearing at the wrong time and asking too many wrong things. He had a way to confuse her, making her to forget what she wanted to say or do. He was an enigma at their first encounter, and he was the same that day. She angered at herself for not being able to revolt against him.

They walked to the manufacturing area. Silently, they reached the cutting area of which Demetra was in charge.

'What's her name?' Marcus asked Demetra on the way to the cutting area.

'Do you mean Christina?'

'She's Christina, isn't she?' He asked and without waiting, he went to the girl who sat on the high stool in front of her computer.

'Hi, Christina.' Marcus greeted her. The girl turned her head to see who it was. Recognizing Marcus, she blushed, remembering their meeting at the teahouse and Eric's rudeness. As reading her thoughts, he said: 'We're passing by and I wanted to greet you. Are you alright?' The girl nodded silently, still astonished by his appearance.

'I just wanted to know who Eric is. Could you tell me more about him?' Marcus started without any preliminaries.

'He's just a friend. We're together in the Statedom. He's one of

Martina's brothers, the wife of Mr Bachter.' Christina murmured bending her head down and studying her hands. He sensed her reluctance to speak about the man, but he still had one more question to ask.

'Are you engaged to him? I had the impression he's in love with you. Are you attracted by him?' The deep blush slowly spread through her face and neck. She looked so miserable that Marcus felt sorry for her.

'I know it's a question which usually no one is asked in our country, but I need your truthful answer, since it's crucial to my investigation. Don't worry; I'm not going to speak about it. Is he your boyfriend?' Marcus almost pleaded with her. However, the girl was stubborn and didn't want to tell him the truth. After waiting for several minutes, Marcus lost hope to get the so wanted answer.

'All right, I got your message. You don't want to tell me because it's your private life and I have no right to intrude. I agree with you.' Marcus tapped lightly on her shoulder. Christina looked as she was ready to burst into tears. Demetra felt sorry for her.

'Did you know Gian Longis well?' Marcus shouted at her. He saw her eyelashes trembled slightly, but he could not tell for sure. She lowered her head, hiding her face from his inquisitor look.

'Christina, tell me, did you know Gian Longis? I won't ask you anything else. Just this question only.' Marcus pleaded again.

'Yes, I did. I knew him from the gym. He's the one who got stabbed to death. I don't know why,' she murmured so low, Marcus hardly managed to hear her. Then she burst into loud sobs. All her body was shaking. Marcus felt helpless in front of such display of emotions. He looked up and saw the fury on Demetra's face.

All that time she stood as a silent witness of his unsuccessful efforts. She didn't want to be involved in any of his schemes. She had no idea why he insisted to be there and questioning that poor thing about her private life. Demetra was sure then that Marcus

spent too many years abroad to take seriously Barbò or in Christina's case, half-Barbò, upbringing, regulations and manners. Nevertheless, when she saw the violent reaction of the girl, she intercepted swiftly.

'It's time to go. We cannot stay here longer. Christina has a daily program to complete; otherwise I must report her for not being able to carry on with her work. It may bring a lot of trouble to her. I cannot cover for her. They'll find out anyway in a few days' time.' Demetra's tone was firm. She didn't want to bring any trouble to that poor girl. He could not even imagine what Christina could face if she'd delay with her work.

To her surprise, Marcus turned to the exit at once and walked away with wide steps, quickly. Demetra almost ran after him. She didn't dare to call him to slow down for not getting the attention of the other operators. Back in her office, she vented on him all her anger.

'Who do you think you are? Who allowed you to treat people as you do? From now on, I want nothing to do with you. Leave my office immediately.' Demetra screamed forgetting there were many eyes and ears to witness the scene. Marcus covered the distance separating them quickly and took her into his arms. She began to fight him in the attempt to get free. He held her in an iron grip. Demetra quickly saw her physical strength could not be compared with his. She stopped fighting and passively stayed in his arms. Seeing her calmed down, Marcus weakened his embrace.

'I did what I had to. I know you're right accusing me of being a rogue but I had no other choice. It's not a place for a lover's quarrel. Let's go out and discuss everything in calm and tranquil atmosphere.' He whispered into her ear.

'A lover's quarrel indeed!' Demetra replied dignified by his words, but she didn't continued. Seeing her quiet, Marcus released her from his hug. Silently, she went to the closet taking off her smock on the way. She hung it there and took her overcoat,

which she put on. Then she took her handbag and turned to face him.

'I'm ready. I agree to discuss your problem in more suitable settings.'

'That's a good girl!' He said picking up his things. Then he took her by the elbow and propelled her to the door.

'Not so close.' She resisted getting her arm free.

'As you wish, my lady.' He smiled teasingly, opening the door for her.

They each drove their car. Demetra was leading ahead. She was going to Anissia's house, knowing her girlfriend was at home. She didn't want to disturb old Thomas every time they needed a private talk.

Glancing twice at her back-view mirror, she clearly saw Marcus's questioning face. Both times, she ignored him. Twice he horned her signalling to turn left where her house was, but she stubbornly went her way. It took over a quarter of an hour before she turned into the driveway. Marcus parked on the street.

She stepped out from the car. Not looking in his direction and not waiting for him, she quickly went to the main door. As she neared, the door opened wide and Anissia was standing on the threshold.

'What a surprise! How could I ever imagine seeing both of you in my humble quarters?' She smiled happily.

'We thought it was time to meet you casually.' Marcus reached them in time to reply.

'Come in. I want you to meet someone.' Anissia said, stepping aside. They entered. Marcus thought of asking who it was, but he didn't have the time since Demetra stepped in already.

'Wow.' Marcus exclaimed at the sight of his own brother, cosily sprawled on the sofa and the big rectangular tray with teakettle placed in front of him on the low table. At their entrance, Alexis rose and stepped forward to greet them.

'That's a real surprise!' Marcus repeated Anissia's words. Then

he said to his brother: 'I'm sorry for the interruption. I can see you're busy here. I…'

'I guess I could do well with a cup of tea.' Demetra interrupted him.

'Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back.' Anissia said leaving the room.

An awkward silence fell in the room. None of them wanted to break it first. Marcus was angry at Demetra for bringing him there. He felt that Alexis was uncomfortable being discovered by his brother's in this girl's house. Only Demetra knew why she came there and she didn't feel any inconvenience.

Anissia returned with two teacups and placed them on the tray.

'Let's have some tea now or it'll get cold.' Alexis' voice was business-like. Demetra giggled spontaneously.

'What's funny?' Marcus snapped at her.

'Everything. Both of you,' she pointed at the men, 'looks like you have ate a bitter lemon. What's wrong with you, guys?'

'Everybody, help yourself. Let's start.' Anissia repeated taking the teakettle and pouring some tea into the nearer cup. They drank in silence. Demetra helped herself with some biscuits. Suddenly, she was hungry after many days of lost appetite.

'I've heard this year our hockey team is ready to win over yours. They've had a Jassenson.' Alexis said.

'Jassenson or the Jassenson?' Marcus asked mockingly.

'Of course, the Jassenson.' Alexis seemed to miss the point. He continued seriously: 'the famous hockey coach from Sweden. He's spent all summer here.'

'Did he like our lifestyle? I hope he's decided to transfer permanently to Karsland.' Marcus mocked again.

'For sure, no. I don't think he'd have a chance to see the country and speak with simple folk. He had four bodyguards. Security, you know.'

'Lucky him! They fussed over him so much I wonder how he could put up with it.' Anissia said.

'If he didn't like it he wouldn't be going to accept the invitation next time, unless they'll offer him double the pay. I've never heard about that Jassenson. Who could think you were a hockey fan.' Demetra said looking at Alexis.

'I'm not. I've heard about the team from one patient who was recovering from a heart attack and worried he could not make it in time to see the match. Some people are funny. Just few weeks before he almost died. And that day, he was worrying about his team winning without him.' Alexis grinned.

'This tea is delicious. What kind is it?' Demetra got bored hearing about sports. She didn't care less who could win and when.

'From Ceylon.' Anissia was glad to change the subject too.

'Do you mean "Sri Lanka"?'

'It's Ceylon again.'

'I didn't know it had changed again.'

'You couldn't. It wasn't mentioned in our media.' Marcus entered into their conversation. 'Ceylon Island was the one producing the most aromatic tea of all. It was spread fast around the world as one of the best, thanks to the British trade. Sri Lanka was the native name of the country but who would know of Sri Lanka tea. Somehow, Ceylon sounded better.' Marcus put his empty cup down.

The next moment, Demetra rose from the sofa. Facing Marcus and turning her back to the others, she pulled his arm with one hand and with the other, she signed to keep silent. Surprised, Marcus followed her without questioning.

'What's wrong with you?' Where are you going?' Alexis was curious.

'I don't know. Ask my fiancée.' Marcus laughed leaving the room.

'What do you think about that?' They heard his brother questioning Anissia but what she replied they didn't know since they're already reached the famous soundproof closet, in which Demetra spent a full day not so long before. They entered in and closed the door behind.

Demetra sat on one of the two low stools placed there and lifted her head to face him.

'Well?' Marcus prompted her. He managed to take the second stool and waited for her next move.

'It's soundproof. You can speak freely.' Demetra said.

'Is it? Of course, I must be a complete fool to underestimate my future bride. I should know that she and her girlfriend were the crafty ones.' Suddenly Marcus exploded. His face reddened from the anger. His reaction took her by surprise.

'What's wrong with this closet? I thought you'd prefer it instead of Thomas's?'

Demetra couldn't figure out why he had gotten so furious.

'And what now? My little prim fiancée will try to convince me she's just an innocent victim of the circumstances. I can imagine how many others you brought into this comfy closet to spend a few tête-à-tête hours,' he screamed at her. He was jealous. Suddenly she was happy knowing for sure he was in love with her. Otherwise, he would have never given her such reaction. She put her hand on top of his and looked into his grey eyes.

'Are you serious? If so, I am the luckiest person I feel like I won the lottery,' she said.

'What nonsense you're speaking! Which lottery? You've read too many junk books. In our country for over seventy years there were no lotteries allowed. You should know it better than me,' he replied irritated but his fury was gone, quickly the same as it came. He cursed himself for not holding his temper. He let her have an upper hand but he didn't care for it.

'All right, let's start from the beginning. I can see you've brought me here to speak in privacy. You didn't want to go to Thomas', I still don't see why yet you didn't choose the old man's closet and preferred this one.'

'For a very simple reason: we cannot always use the same place. The Guardians are watching us. In here we're more secure,' Demetra replied.

'Are you sure of it? How long Anissia does have lived in this house? Who did the soundproofing for her?' Marcus interrogated Demetra.

'Nobody. She found it when she moved in.'

'Well-well, and now you think that no one knows about this place except you and your highly-educated girlfriend, and my subdued brother?' He stopped and looked into her eyes. There she read the answer. It hit her at once. If the former occupant of that house was taken into custody by the Guardians, then for sure those people knew about the existence of that special closet. She was a fool. Demetra stood up at once.

'You're right. We must leave right away. I spotted the Guardians's car when I was here last time. I thought they'd followed me but what if they didn't? If they're here often to watch over her house and everyone who passes here.' Demetra panicked. She wanted to reach for the door, but his long legs stood on her way.

'Move your legs. I must get out.' She said unceremoniously.

'Why so fast? Since we're here, it makes no difference if we stay five minutes or five hours. They know we're here,' he replied lazily. His face was full of mockery.

Demetra could not think any more about anything except to run to her home. She completely forgot for what reason she had brought him there and what she wanted to tell him. She panicked. Her reaction left him speechless. As all Stakhanò, he truly believed that there was no way for them to lose temper or to act as a caged animal. He saw such behaviour abroad, but never inside their country. All of the sudden, he felt pity for the girl who seemed of being on her last string. For sure, she was under stress. But why? He didn't believe it was because of *Stimulazer*. There had to be something else and it had to be something big, Marcus thought.

'Let's go. I'll bring you home. Leave your car here. I'll ask Alexis to bring it to your house. He can do it easily with Anissia.' Marcus then stood up. He embraced her tightly, as confirming his words. Demetra just nodded in agreement. They left the closet.

'Oh, you're back.' The off-hand remark of Anissia added oil to Demetra's fire. She just clenched her wrists without daring to say a word.

'We're leaving. Sorry, for the intrusion. I'll take Demetra in my car. Could you bring her car to the house? Anytime you can.' Marcus looked at his brother.

'No problem. We understand. Don't worry about the car. It'll be there before the night.' Alexis assured him. Anissia sat quietly, lost to her thoughts.

'See you, Marcus.'

'See you.' The men greeted each other but the girls ignored each other. They closed the door behind them, not waiting for their host.

It was a different matter to sit in the car, next to the man, enjoying the ride.

Demetra reluctantly admitted to herself she preferred to be a passenger than a driver. She calmed down considerably, although her face was mask-like, hiding her real emotions. Once they'd reached her house, Demetra proposed him to leave his car on the street.

'If you wish.' He had no problem with that.

'It's not what I wish. It's acceptable by the country's code of behaviour. Somebody might think you're staying here all night.' Demetra clarified her point.

'Let them speak, I know what I'm doing.'

'You should care more for us, if you're serious about us, than for yourself.' She retorted. He didn't say anything more but parked outside of her driveway. They crossed her lawn and reached the main door.

As soon as they were in, Marcus took her in his arms and pulled her closer to him. She didn't fight him. Just the opposite, to her own surprise her body willingly moved closer to his. The feeling of security overtook her. She needed it after all those days spent alone, waiting for him. Being so close to him, she could feel his

heartbeat, strong and fast. She put her hand on his chest. He covered it with his bigger one. Then he brought it to his lips and kissed her palm. She felt his hot breath on her hand and this simple caress brought the tears to her eyes. She had to be out of her wits to react as she did to the man's tender care. She should feel excited and warm but instead of it, she thought about her father and his last telephone call. Marcus sensed her mood.

'Tell me what has been bothering you? What happened over these days since I've left you alone? I want to help you. Trust me. I only want you to be happy.' He whispered into her ear.

'You're right. I'm very upset. I don't know what to do.' Demetra honestly replied. She wanted, no, she needed his help, advice and care. She felt as a fish-out-of-water.

'Well, now we can have a real talk.' He put his arm across her shoulders and directed her to the back of the house. Demetra understood he was bringing her to Thomas's.

The old man was out but it made no difference to them. They still had a key of his back door. Soon they were in the closet. Marcus took the seat at first, and then he pulled her to sit on his lap. She let him. He held her in his arms. She felt like being five-year-old girl again, when she was with her father.

'I've got the most terrible call in my life.' Demetra began her story. 'My father was so cool and reserved as he was a stranger to me. My father! He's the only person to me could trust with my life. I've betrayed him. He knows I've told you about *Stimulazer*. He does. What can I do to return his love and trust? Help me.' Demetra pleaded with her eyes full of tears.

Marcus knew she was telling the truth. He listened to those CD by himself. If Barbò already knew about *Stimulazer*, for Stakhanò it was not a secret either. There were more chances to hear gossip for everyone who lived far from the capital city.

'I must do something. I must.' Demetra clung to him desperately.

'You're right. We must do something. Why don't we go to your parents and explain everything? I'm sure your father will under-

stand your motive for sharing your secret with me. I'll go with you. I'll tell him I insisted to know. It's my fault.' Marcus offered.

'I don't think it'll help. He's a very stubborn person. But we could try to persuade him anyway.' Demetra agreed.

'I can go any time. I've already said to Robert we need to set a date for our wedding with your parents. How about you? I don't think Odin will have anything against your absence for a few days.' Marcus said.

'When I spoke with you about my trip, I didn't tell you everything.' Demetra said suddenly.

'What do you mean? Did somebody hurt you?' Marcus was quick on imagining bad things, Demetra thought.

'Oh, no. Nothing of that sort has happened to me. It's a completely different matter. I've got a strange encounter.'

'Did you tell about it to your father? What did he say?'

'Funny thing, I was so shocked by his revelations that I forgot to tell him about it.'

'Tell me now, and quickly.'

'The day following my arrival, I went, as usual, to the forest, to one of the lakes I used to go for a swimming ever since I was a girl. I reached it, walked around, found a place to sit and drowsed. I awoke from something touching me. I opened my eyes and saw a heavy military boot, size 46, as I now recall. I was told I was in a military zone. OFF LIMITS zone!' Demetra stopped noting astonishment on his face. After a while, he asked her: 'OFF LIMITS? Are you sure you understood them well?'

'I know my mother tongue very well.'

'I know you do.' Marcus was silent again.

'Later on when I was on the plane, a strange thought came to my mind. How is it possible to have a military zone in the country that claims of not having any army for over seventy years? What is the use of a military corps? Tell me I'm wrong.' Demetra announced.

'I'll be damn to tell you so.' He said. Then he squeezed her more

and said in a shaking voice: 'Demetra, I'm afraid for you. You seemed a good, simple girl but it's not so. You have a lot of brains and a lot of courage. You should never mention that encounter to no one, including your girlfriends.'

'I don't have girlfriends. I have Anissia only.'

'Not even to her. For sure, she cares for your well-being, but what more you know about her. It's strange she has a house with a soundproof closet. Didn't you find it unusual? If I were you, I would be careful when speaking with her. Did you tell her something? Did she ask you something?' Marcus continued to interrogate her. Demetra began trembling more and more with each of his question.

'She offered her help through Robert Young.' She remembered now.

'What do you mean? Tell me exactly what did she say.' He insisted.

'I don't remember now. I was alone and terrified noting the guardians' car. Then my bell rang. It was Anissia. She saw me in such a confused state and took me to her home. I've spent there all day. We sat all day in the closet and spoke. She mentioned something about giving a file to Alexis and was sure you had it. Then she offered her help. I said I didn't know anything. That's all.' Demetra concluded. Marcus was silent.

'She may be innocent or maybe not. I'll see what I can find out about her. You must stay away from her, in case she's a traitor. My brother knows nothing about our conversation. He's just a doctor whose life is about his patients, in my brother's case, dead bodies. Nothing more.' Marcus stated. Then without warning, he kissed her on her lips. She welcomed it, only longing for tender caress. She knew by then, she missed the man's touch and his touch only.

They kissed for a long time, enjoying the real privacy offered by this closet. It was so nice not to think about taped walls, CCTV and hundreds of CD piled on his desk.

Chapter 14

'I'll be out for a few days. Demetra and I need some time to organise our wedding. We've already heard from her parents. They're delighted about our decision. I hope there are no problems about my absence?' Marcus looked at Robert, who was busy getting through classification of accumulated files.

'Don't worry. Take your time, as long as you need.'

'Thanks. All that fuss with the wedding dress and flowers. And there's nothing here except in…'

'Wolf Cave? Isn't it?' Robert's voice slightly trembled, Marcus noted.

'Yea. We're told there's no better place than that.'

'Lucky you! I've spent there one week myself, with my wife, of course. She's my ex now.' Robert said quickly. His frank admission was new to Marcus, who was not sure on how to react.

'I didn't know you're married before.' Marcus forced himself to some kind of reply.

'Don't think about me. I'm better off alone. Go. Enjoy yourself. I'll be here. Our work will continue as usual.' Robert assured him,

'In that case, I'll be back after the New Year holidays.'

'Excellent. See you then.' Robert greeted him, without turning his face from the screen.

Over the past week, ever since Marcus and Demetra confided in each other, she finally made up her mind to stay with him. Marcus decided about that the first time he had set his eyes on her.

They told to everyone they were going to Wolf Cave, a fashionable resort in the middle of the forest about forty kilometres South from Viking Wish. It was one of the places frequented by young Stakhanò couples that wanted to spend a few days in its

relaxed atmosphere, while making arrangements for a pending matrimony, as it was custom in Karsland.

But secretly, they prepared for a trip to Demetra's parents. Marcus suggested travelling by car, avoiding their registration on airplane files. As for driving, they decided to take their chances, hoping no one would stop them for a random check on the road. Demetra agreed with him.

Ever since the day he brought her home with his car, she discovered the pleasure of sitting next to him and watching him while he was driving. Every time she looked at him, she found something new on his face, his posture, and his manners. She decided he was the worst mannered person she had ever met, but also the most enchanting, providing her with a stimulus in their verbal battles.

When the planned day arrived, Marcus woke early, at six o'clock; he then was on his way to Viking Wish. His attention was caught by a familiar figure, walking forward Ultra supermarket. He swerved right and, entering the parking lot, sped up to catch up with her.

'Martina, wait for me.' He called the woman. She turned and stopped waiting for him.

'I'd never thought you'd shop so early, with all the free time you have during the day.' Marcus teased her, but she seemed to take it upside down.

'Yes, I'm Barbò and as all of us, I do nothing all day but watching TV.' She replied caustically.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to sound so impolite. I was just wondering why you're up so early today.' Marcus changed his tone.

'I didn't sleep all night. Eric is missing. He hasn't been at his apartment for at least a few days. No one seemed to have seen him going in or out. I went there. His things are in place, but he's not there.' Martina uttered in a broken voice.

Marcus glanced at her, noticing dark circles under her eyes. She seemed to have aged suddenly.

'What did Odin say?' He asked her gently.

'He doesn't know what to think. I'm going to report to the Guardians about Eric's disappearance. I think it's time they look for him. Where could he be? He's Barbò and as all of us, he loves his cosy apartment and all the comforts coming with it.'

'Don't worry. He's a big boy and does what he wants. I'm sure he's decided on spot to visit one of his old friends. You'll see, he'll be back or he'll call to tell you where he is.' Marcus assured her in a bright cheerful voice. 'We're leaving today for Wolf Cave. We'll see you when we'll be back after the New Year Holidays.'

'I'm so happy for you. Demetra is a real treasure. All brains and beauty, it's a rare combination, as I found out from my life experience.' Martina smiled at him.

'Thanks. I agree with you. Happy New Year to both of you!' Marcus hugged her with the affection of an old friend. They parted. He watched her entering the supermarket and only after she vanished inside he went to his car, wondering if Eric's disappearance has had something to do with the death of Gian Longis. Remembering Eric's fierce rage, Marcus was sure the young man had some connection with that murder, although there was no proof of it.

He still could recall the husky voice of Eric on that CD, of which contents Marcus cancelled from the office computer and tackled safely between various paints and mixtures in his laboratory. Who'll be looking for a CD in there?

When he reached Demetra house, he parked the car in her driveway facing the street. It was decided they'd use his sedan, new and big, for the long trip. Hearing his arrival, Demetra came out quickly and ran to him.

'You're fully equipped for a winter ride.' She laughed moving her head in the direction of back seats. Marcus winked, understanding what she meant. There were heavy chains in case of emergency snow. Demetra wanted to reprimand him about his carelessness. He should have kept them in the boot. If by chance somebody would notice the chains, and report on them, she

thought. No one needs those in Wolf Cave. She didn't say anything, afraid of being heard. The Guardians' car was always on patrol and most of the time it stopped not too far from her house.

'It's cold today.' She shivered slightly. 'I'm going back inside. Be quick.' He got out immediately and ran after her.

'Is this your luggage?' He stopped in the threshold, staring incredibly at the various-size suitcases, leather boxes and paper bags placed in the centre of her sitting room. 'Are you sure you've packed enough to be comfortable during the trip? I would say you're not taking enough.' He sounded so convincing; Demetra took his words by its value.

'I was worried you may say I packed too many things. My father always complains about my luggage. I'm so happy you didn't. I love to be comfortable. It's no news for you I always carry many things. However, this trip is special and we cannot stop and shop on our way. You well know why.' Demetra uttered happily reaching him on impulse and kissing on his cheek. He just twisted his lips not wanting to let her know the truth that he thought exactly like her father. Instead, he said: 'I think we should leave soon after breakfast. Let's go to the kitchen fast. I'm so hungry I could eat you as well.' He joked.

'Everything is ready. Our food for the trip is in these two baskets and that green icebox.' She said pointing to her luggage.

'Excellent.' He replied and turned to the kitchen. Seeing her happy face, he decided not to mention his encounter with Martina. He'd tell her some other time.

One hour later, they left. When Marcus packed her luggage in the car, Demetra went through the house just to check if everything was in order. By law, the Guardians have a right in case of emergency to enter her house and she didn't care to let them find her things in disarray. They left through the back door, which she locked as usual. She gave to Thomas a bunch of spare house keys, telling him about their trip to Wolf Cave. They thought it was better that way.

The day promised to be excellent, if we could describe as such a day in the end of December in the Northern Sphere, approximately sixty three degrees north. It was frosty, a few degrees below zero, but no snow was falling nor freezing rain, which was a gift by itself.

At first they'd driven south, in case someone noticed them. After a while, they made a U-turn and headed north.

'Are you sure this is a sufficient distance for a change of direction? If the Guardians saw us leaving, they could have followed us easily along these lousy ten kilometres and see us turning again.' Demetra whispered. He hardly heard her words. With the corner of his eye, he glimpsed at her anxious face in the morning bright light.

'There is nothing to worry about. We can always say we've changed our mind and went North instead of South, can't we?' Marcus comforted her.

'I don't think they would buy our story. They're not so stupid.' Demetra insisted.

'I didn't say they'll believe to it. I said we'll tell them our version, and it's their problem to buy it or not. Let's change subject. Let's enjoy our drive that may finish in real matrimony. I'm sure we could marry at your parents' place, couldn't we? I'm losing my patience. You know what I mean?'

'You shouldn't mention such thing.' Demetra sounded dignified. 'For sure you don't care for me to be listed as one who had premarital sex. Personally, it makes no difference to me, but since everything is registered, classified and catalogued in our organised country, as they say, for our own good, I cannot risk my reputation.'

'I know what you're talking about. All these rules and regulations. They're disgusting and humiliating, but I also don't want that some law-obeying citizen could tell our children about their mother not being virgin on the day of her marriage.' Marcus twisted his lips. He abhorred this country, but it was his birthplace and he could do nothing about it.

'My parents will be delighted if I'll marry there. My father thinks it's almost time for him to become a grandfather.' Demetra laughed.

'Let's hope they'll still be happy to have me as their son-in-law, after we tell them our main news.' Marcus added.

'I'm sure they will.' She moved closer to him, her shoulder touching his.

'How many kilometres, exactly, to their place?' He turned his head and kissed her quickly on the cheek.

'Three hundred twenty, as I remember.'

'Not so bad. There are excellent highways without traffic. If you could only see the roads of the Old Europe, you would feel lucky to live here.' He laughed glancing at her.

'At last, you've found something good in Karsland. I wonder if your protector, Mr I., didn't find out about your opinion on his beloved country. I've always had the impression that Mr I. is in love with everything that's here. I mean laws, rules and so on. He's so enthusiastic about anything connected with regulations.' Demetra mocked at him.

'He has to be. Don't forget it's all his. He's the President and in this country, it's equal to the King in the old monarchy. When I was in Italy, I've visited some of the Dukes' palaces in which there was the world!' Marcus replied ignoring her sarcasm.

They were on the main highway connecting the extreme southern point of the country to its extreme northern. It was made of reinforced concrete panels, heated in winter to prevent the accumulation of ice; three-line each way with wide shoulder, assuring driver safety in case of an emergency stop. Without mentioning the traffic helicopter passing above them every three minutes and the arrival of a medical emergency team in case of accident in one minute and half. The sound of helicopters could be alarming for someone, but not for Karslanders, who were used to it since childhood.

As their drive continued, on both sides of the highway there

were towns similar to one another since the whole country was fully rebuilt after its creation. Architecturally, it was identical everywhere, the difference stood in the country setting. Viking Wish laid in the southern part of the country, with the dominance of poplar and birch. That was where they entered the boreal forest, or so called, taiga, with its pines, firs and spruces. Demetra felt like she was heading home.

'Look what's there. Isn't it a little fox? I can see its red tail.' She exclaimed suddenly pointing on something to her right.

'I saw nothing. It must be your imagination. This forest is too dense to see much beyond the trees in their immediate vicinity.' Marcus replied almost angrily.

'What's wrong with you? Are you offended?' Demetra got irritated.

'No, I don't. You saw a fox and I didn't. That's all. The matter is closed.' Marcus said dryly.

'Oh, no,' Demetra objected. 'I want to enjoy our ride. I don't want to speak about anything but nature. You may don't know this, but my ancestors lived in this land for thousands of years. They've always been free to move and to settle where they wanted. Only now, my father, in the name of comocratia must stay where he was assigned to. He cannot take his family and go where his soul called him anymore. His ancestors were Eastern Vikings who roamed all through Russia as far as to Tsar-Grad, as they called Constantinople.'

'Don't think that only your ancestors were here. Mine were here, too. My name is the proof of it. Yours isn't. You're Demetra, the name of the Greek Goddess of fertility.' Marcus was serious now. When noticing the tears in her eyes, he changed his tone quickly: 'I was just joking. Don't take it seriously. Come on.' He pulled her to him with his right hand. She still pursed her lips, when she moved closer to him until her left shoulder was rested under his right pit arm. Feeling his warmth, she calmed down and relaxed. He had a way to make her feel secure, the same as

her father, she thought closing her eyes. Maybe he's right; instead of looking around, I should think about what to say to my father when I'll see him. Under the monotonous sound of tires running on the concrete, she dozed off. The sudden movement awoke her.

'Goddamn!' She heard Marcus cursing and opening her eyes, she saw at once what the problem was.

In front of them, there was a traffic jam. There was no way to see what was going on. It was their luck that Marcus, who used to drive on the overcrowded roads of Europe, knew how to break in time. In front of them was complete chaos. As far as Demetra could see from her window, there were vehicles bumped into each other and the majority of drivers were out and screaming at each other, which was by itself an unusual sight.

'I'll try to see how long this queue is,' Marcus said getting out from the car, 'I wonder why the helicopter is not here yet.' He finished his sentence under the sound of the propellers.

'I'll ask that guy, if he knows what's going on here.' Marcus managed to make a few steps, when he saw the group of people running towards them. In a few moments they would have reached them but before they did, he swiftly got back in the car. As soon as he took his place, he started the engine. Then he began such a manoeuvre, which Demetra would have never even imagined.

'Move, move to the right, 'He shouted at the driver on his right.

'Move, move to the left.' He shouted to the left. To Demetra's amazement, both drivers obeyed and managed to clear some space just enough for their sedan to move. Demetra knew there could be never enough space for a U-turn. But Marcus's plan was different. He drove reversed, slowly but sure getting out of the traffic jam. It was an adventure which Demetra would have never even dreamt of. It was unheard in her quiet correct world of Stakhanò. Marcus seemed not being surprised at all in such an awkward situation. He continued on reverse until he reached the last car in line. Only then, he made a U-turn and sped up facing the upcoming traffic.

'What are you doing? Stop at once. We'll die.' Demetra began to

scream, the cold fear paralysed her. She was sure they'll get into a head collision with the approaching vehicle.

'Shut up. Don't disturb my concentration. Don't you see, if we don't get out of here, we'll be stuck here for God knows how long, I don't care for driving at night, unless you care for being stop every few minutes by Guardian's patrol for questioning.' Marcus said sharply.

'Questioning?' Demetra lifted her eyebrows.

'Be happy if it's only for that.'

'Did you see what it was in front of us who made people to run away from it? I believe you did.' Demetra said suddenly understanding his behaviour.

'I'll tell you later on.' He replied harshly.

With the corner of her eye, she glimpsed at him, but his face was an impenetrable mask; the eyes fixed on the road. She noted the white knuckles of his hands as he firmly held the steering wheel and drove as a lunatic.

After a while, she spotted an entrance of the highway. He seemed to have seen it too, since he swerved left and, without reducing the speed, passed through the entrance and out on the asphalt road. He made a U-turn again and without stopping continued on his crazy ride. After a few minutes, they spotted a local road into which he turned and slowed down stopping at last.

'What luck!' He breathed out in relief. His face was red covered with white stains. His eyes were still bulged out but she felt his relief.

'I guess you didn't get upset just for a few cars bumped into each other. I didn't find it so terrifying. It was more horrible to see you driving as a lunatic, facing the upcoming traffic. It was fortunate so few vehicles were on the road.' Demetra was upset by his conduct, which put their lives in danger.

'You wouldn't be so high and mighty if you could see what it was that created such a traffic jam.' Marcus said at last finding his tongue.

'In this case, tell me what was there,' she insisted.

'Are you sure you want to know it? I don't think you do,' he said keeping her in the dark.

'For sure, I want,' she said pursing her lips being annoyed by his reluctance.

'Well, in this case, I'll tell you later on.' He cut short suddenly and turned the engine key.

In complete silence, they continued the journey driving on small roads. He seemed of being determined to avoid highways. They drove non-stop, crossing the numerous towns and villages or just passing through dense forests and along lakes covered with thin ice. Demetra wondered what made him act as he did. Her curiosity was soon satisfied when Marcus stopped suddenly in the middle of nowhere and switched off the engine.

'I need a drink,' he said suddenly rummaging inside the door pocket on the driver's side. 'I've tucked it somewhere.' He explained, almost apologizing.

'There is it.' He brought out a flat old-fashioned, leather-covered flask. Unscrewing the tap, he poured some liquor into it. Then he looked at Demetra. 'Do you care for a sip?' Of course, she refused his offer.

'To our health!' He cheered her and drank the liquid in one gulp. 'Wow.' He breathed out.

'It looks like our ancestors were right to have a long engagement before the matrimony. I've never thought you're drinking the strong spirits as water. It's a revelation for me.' Demetra said slowly looking into his eyes.

'My dear future wife, you don't know many things about me. I'm bind to be patient and gallant. As for strong spirits, as you said, I still remember someone who not so long ago drank Cognac.' He laughed openly at her.

'Oh!' She angrily turned away from him. 'Look at the right, some people are running towards us.'

'I don't think it's a good idea to face anybody just now,' he said and started the engine. They drove away when the gap between them

and the group was just a few meters and Demetra could hear someone screaming at them: 'these are Stakhanò. Beat them; they're slaves of the society.' Demetra was taken aback by those words.

'What did they mean by calling me "slave"?' She wondered.

'It's clear to me. They called you a slave, one that is completely subservient to a dominating influence. I agree with them.' Marcus replied smiling at her. She took it as a joke and he decided to leave it that way. Later on, he would explain what he meant.

He pressed harder on the gas pedal and soon they left the angry group far behind.

In a few minutes, the interstate highway came in sight.

'At last.' Marcus was relieved, heading directly to it.

'I don't see any vehicle coming from the South.' Demetra noted.

'No surprise there is still blockage on. We've lost a lot of time already.' Marcus said, turning into the entrance of the highway. Soon they're speeding up again, but trying to stay inside speed limits for not getting attention of traffic control. The sound of a helicopter was following them all the way.

'It looks like we're left alone for a while. Did you notice there were no patrol cars for over ten minutes? I guess they're all busy.'

'Tell me, what did you see in front of us when we were stuck in the jam?' Demetra was curious again.

'If I'll tell anyone, no one would believe it. But I know you'd do. Someone blocked a highway by piling TVs, one on top of the other. There were hundreds of them. On top of the barricade, somebody left several long strips of sheets. Each had writing. There were many different ones, but I remember only a few. There were written:

'*Stimulazer* is a brain cleanser
Out brain-washers from the State
Out leeches from the State
Barbò isn't a Sucker
Stakhanò isn't a Slave
Stop legalised polarization of the people'

'These were the main ones.' Marcus said looking with the corner of his eye at her.

'I don't believe you. You've made up this story.' She refused his story categorically.

'Believe it or not. Why did you think I've decided to get out from there? Why did you think those people were running towards us, instead of waiting for the arrival of a helicopter? I'll tell you why. No one wanted to be involved into unpleasant things. No one wants to be questioned by the Guardians.' His reply was sharp and short.

Demetra turned her face away and looked through the window. The scenery was picturesque. The snow covered the ground and the trees and reflected in the sun. It was only twelve thirty and they'd been driving just for over three hours. Nevertheless, for her it looked like they were forever on that endless ride. She wanted to get off and to walk on the soft snow, something she'd always liked, ever since she was a little girl. There was no way of doing such thing. Marcus seemed to be determined to keep going until they reach her parent's village, Lapland Cave.

She took the flat bottle, which she left tucked in one of the door pockets near her, and sipped from it. Suddenly she realised she didn't know how to handle those horrible things. There was a big difference between thinking about what was right and wrong and to face furious faces of Barbò who outnumbered Stakhanò by far. Demetra didn't care much for history, but the guillotine of French revolution, that she would remember forever. That sad part of history was explicitly described in the Constitution of Karsland.

'I don't think you should worry too much about these signs and screams of Barbò. I'm sure Karsland is not France and Barbò are not murderous masses who are after your blood. These are just a few frustrated Barbò, who suddenly found out that they've been duped for a long time. Let's see what comes next. The State is still untouched and the Guardians are still loyal to the State. As long as the Guardians are loyal, there will be no changes.' As reading

her thoughts, Marcus whispered to her and pulled her closer to him. She was again near him, supporting his right armpit with her left shoulder.

'Do you want something? Some water?' She muttered lazily still holding the bottle in her hands.

'No, thanks. I'm alright.' Marcus said, not moving his eyes from the road.

The sound of a coming helicopter blocked out his last words. It passed above them so low that Demetra was sure the Guardians could read their car licence plates. She shuddered slightly but didn't comment, concerning about the possibility of them registering their conversation.

'Thank God, it passed quickly.' Marcus said when the sound of the helicopter engine died.

'How many kilometres are left? Hundred?' Demetra asked.

'Exactly hundred fifty-four. If we continue as we did, we'll be there in about two and a half hours.' Marcus replied.

'I hope so.' Demetra said and closed her eyes. Then she opened them again.

'Are you sure you have enough petrol? How can we fill in? If we'll refill at the gas station, we need to give our ID batch.' Demetra worried.

'I've thought about it already. I have a three twenty five litre containers filled with petrol. It's enough to reach your parent's house.'

'Did you? How did you manage to get it? It's not allowed to keep petrol in the house.' Demetra wondered.

'Don't ask too many questions. I cannot answer all of them.' He laughed and pushed her slightly with his elbow. His mood was improving, Demetra thought.

After a while, the dense boreal forest replaced the post-creation towns and villages.

'We'll get out at the first exit. We can stop now for our lunch.' Marcus said slowing down for not missing their turn. Exits were

located every fifteen kilometres despite of the lack of villages. They were now on an asphalt road, leading deep into the forest. No soul or vehicle was in sight. After a few hundred meters, he spotted an opening and drove directly to it on a narrow road, covered with a thin layer of snow. The rest was ice. He stopped in the middle of the opening.

'It could be a perfect place for lunch in the summer. But I think it's good as well in winter. We'll eat in the car and admire this beautiful view.' Marcus said, switching off the engine.

'Do you think it's a good idea to stay in such an isolated place?'

'Why not? Here are no criminals.'

'What about those Barbò?'

'Come on, girl. You don't know what's going on in the other countries. One lousy murder and the whole country are in turmoil. What are you going to do when there will be thousands of murders per year?'

'I hope it won't come to that.' Demetra replied, but her voice was everything but convincing.

'Don't worry about a thing when I'm with you. I can handle any of those rascals who decide to hurt my property.'

'Yours?'

'My future property.' He corrected himself and all of the sudden hugged her with his right arm and kissed her quickly on her lips.

'I'm so hungry I could eat you too.' He joked, biting her slightly on her neck. She tried to free herself from him.

'Be serious. Get the basket with the red bow.' He got out and went to the back. He opened the trunk and found what he was looking for. Then he brought it to the front and placed it between their seats.

'Excellent.' She said and opened the cover. There were several thermoses, each of a different colour. Marcus lifted his eyebrows.

'They each contain a different dish. I have chicken soup, borsch and minestrone. For a second course there are *goulash*, *lasagne*, *cotoletta* Milanese. Then I have…'

'You're kidding. Who needs such a wide choice? You should have made two sandwiches for each of us and some fruit. It would have been sufficient. Who'll be eating all this food? Your parents?'

'Don't worry. I'll eat everything by myself.' Demetra said, pursing her lips. She got offended. She never liked to cook but that time, she wanted to please him. And what did she get? I'll never cook for him again, she wowed to herself silently.

'OK, give me your chicken soup. I guess it's the best for a start.' Marcus softened seeing her upset. Without looking at him, she picked up a yellow thermos and handled it to him. He took it and immediately unscrewed its wide tap. The delicious aroma filled the car.

'You must be a magician to keep this palatable dish hot and tasty. I wonder if it was you who designed these ultra-modern thermoses which are able to keep the liquid hot for so long.' Marcus laughed picking up the spoon and tasting the soup.

'Wow, delicious.' He said and added: 'lucky me, to have a wife who can cook such a tasty meal.'

'Don't even think you'll be having such food every day. I'm a working person and haven't got time for kitchen pursuits.' Demetra dashed out his dreams quickly.

Marcus emptied his thermos quickly and asked for *lasagne*. Demetra handled to him a flat violet thermos.

'Did you get the set of thermoses called Rainbow?' Marcus asked.

'Why?'

'At first was yellow, now violet. Then I see you have a red, blue and even indigo one. What colour is missing?' He laughed, enjoying teasing her.

'When I've bought the set, you're right, it was called Rainbow, but I didn't know why. I didn't even think to connect it with anything else.' Demetra replied dryly.

'I know you didn't. You couldn't do it just for one simple reason: in our country, the art does not exist anymore. We're a country of

robots, post-democracy, the highest level of human development or better to say, the highest level of slavery.' Marcus said.

'Let's change subject. You're always too critical of everything. I don't agree with you. We're a real free country, which succeeded to give to the masses what they fought for centuries.' Demetra replied sharply.

'All right. I'm not going to argue again on this subject. This *lasagne* is delicious, almost the same as the one I had in Italy.'

'Italy again. Always Italy. You never speak about any other country but Italy.' Demetra angered unexpectedly.

'One day I'll bring you there and you'll understand why I speak only about Italy. What's for dessert?' Marcus said calmly.

'I have various fruits and some cakes.'

'I'll have one apple, then coffee with a piece of your cake. You choose for me.'

Demetra began to serve him the rest of the lunch, eating in between herself.

Taking the last piece of her Bavarian cream cake into the mouth, Marcus glanced at his wristwatch.

'It's a magical place but we must move. It's almost two thirty and we must be there before dark, which falls around four.' Marcus said, sweeping his mouth with a paper napkin and shaking off the crumbs from his chest. Demetra followed his example silently, cleaning up after the meal, tightening corks on the thermoses and dumping everything into baskets.

'Put these back into the trunk, please.' Without a word, Marcus opened the car door and took the baskets to the trunk. Swiftly he was back and at once started the engine of the car.

'With God's help we'll be there in one hour.' He said pressing hard on the gas pedal. The car sped up.

They entered the highway again. It was still deserted and remained so until they reached the exit leading to Lapland Cave.

'I wonder if there's no traffic at all in winter.' Demetra astonished.

'I don't think so; otherwise the State Committee wouldn't have built this new ultra-modern highway. I guess the road is still blocked and no one was allowed to proceed. If we didn't get out right away, we could still be there now.' Marcus said.

'Oh, no.'

'Oh, yes.' He repeated. The rest of the journey they spent in silence. Demetra thought about her parents and what Marcus thought she could not imagine at all.

They reached Lapland Cave soon after four. The road ran through the forest. It was already dark. The snow covered the ground and the forest was reflecting the light, making it easy for them to orient in the dark.

'Are you sure it's not an OFF LIMITS zone?' Marcus asked her suddenly.

'I don't know. It's the only road leading to the house.' Demetra replied, getting afraid at the thought of meeting those soldiers again.

'How far from here to the house?'

'About three kilometres.'

'Not too bad.' Marcus said pressing harder on the gas pedal. Their sedan was running at the highest speed possible along the road but Marcus thought it was not quick enough to cross that damned area. Then a few lights blinked ahead of them.

'We made it.' Demetra yelled happily knowing their journey was over.

'Let's reach it before we say that.' Marcus was more cautious then her.

There was nothing to be cautious about. The lights were getting nearer and soon the dense forest was left behind and they entered into the huge residential area. The multicoloured lights ran through all of it, adding cheerfulness to the already decorated pines, which were used as Christmas trees. It looked like a holiday's postcard.

'My God, I'm back to Old Europe.' Marcus exclaimed over-

whelmed by that feeling of coming home, which was so unusual for Karslanders.

'It is Europe.' Demetra contradicted him.

'Which house is yours?' Marcus asked pretending not to hear her.

'That one, the second from the left. With black smoke coming from the chimney. My mother is always feeling cold and my father is forced to keep the fire all day long.'

'I wonder why the State is allowing such luxury as to burn precious wood twenty four hours a day.' Marcus replied sarcastically, turning into the street narrowed by high snow banks on both sides.

He stopped the car near the gate. Demetra got off quickly and ran through the gate and up on the snow-covered walkway to the house.

'Open up. It's me, Demetra.' She screamed, forgetting to press the bell button.

'Who's there?' She heard some commotion after a while. Then the door opened wide.

'Demetra? What brings you here? Is something wrong? You were with us just recently.' Her mother was stunned at her reappearance.

'Nothing wrong, mamma. I've brought you my future husband.' Demetra said hugging her mother.

'What a surprise! It's a real New Year present for us.' Elena kissed her on both her cheeks. Then she added: 'come in. It's too cold to stay here.'

'Just a moment.' Demetra stepped back from her.

'Come here.' She called Marcus who was standing near the car. Rapidly, he crossed the distance between them in swift strides.

'This is Marcus.'

'Happy to meet you. Welcome to our home.' Elena hugged him on impulse but let him go almost at once.

'It's too cold to stay outside. Let's go in. Father is waiting for you.' She said.

With quivering heart, Demetra entered the room. Her father sat in his armchair. His face was impenetrable and grave. His figure was tense and waiting. He didn't move to greet them at their entrance. He looked as a stranger, Demetra thought. However, she was determined to conquer his love again. She ran to him, kneeled in front of him and put her face in his lap. Her father did not move.

'Father, forgive me. I'll explain everything to you. I haven't betrayed you. I didn't have other choice than to act as I did.' Demetra burst into tears.

'Don't cry. You know I cannot see you unhappy.' He said suddenly putting his hand on top of her head. This familiar gesture made Demetra feel guiltier than before. Instead of calming down, she was now sobbing in full with tears running down her cheeks.

'Hush, my little one. We'll speak about everything later. Don't cry. You know how I am. I can be angry one moment and the next I'd forget and forgive. Take off your coat and let's start anew.' The father said. He lifted his head and saw Marcus, standing alone near the entrance.

Marcus was lost at such display of emotions. He was not used to caresses from his parents, even having been brought up with them. His mother was a medical doctor as Alexis and was never at home. His father was with research laboratories and died quite young. The strange expression on the face of the younger man, made Fedor let Demetra free.

'And who is that young man, patiently waiting for us? Your visit is a surprise to us and I guess this handsome stranger is the second, isn't it?' Her father lifted her chin and looked into his daughter's eyes. Demetra blushed.

'I can see I'm right. Come here, young gentleman, and tell me your name and who you are.' Fedor called to Marcus who immediately went to them.

'I'm Marcus Vanderson. Your daughter's future husband.' He presented himself.

'Aren't you? I didn't know my daughter was engaged, at least not a few months ago when she was here on vacation.' Her father said, looking now at Demetra who seemed embarrassed by the situation.

'Father, this thing, I mean our engagement, came out so unexpectedly there was no time to inform you. This is why Marcus and I decided to come here and tell you about it in person. Also, we need to speak with you about some other things.' She uttered with a considerable effort.

'Some other things?' Fedor lifted his eyebrows. Demetra stood up and took the seat nearest to her father. Marcus continued to stand. She looked at him questionably, but he shook his head negatively as telling her to keep quiet for a moment.

In that moment, Elena entered the room carrying the big round tray with teakettle and teacups and a variety of cakes and mini-sandwiches, as Marcus was quick to notice.

'Drop everything and come here quickly. The tea is the number one remedy against cold.' The mother said, placing the tray on the coffee table near the sofa.

Demetra rose immediately and went to Marcus. Taking him by the hand, she directed him to the sofa where they sat together.

'That's better.' Elena agreed. 'Fedor, come here too. Take that seat next to your daughter.'

'No, I prefer to have it here.'

'Everybody, help yourself. Serve Marcus, Demetra.' Elena commanded arranging two cups presumably for herself and Fedor.

'In this house, the tea is the main source of life. If Italians live for food, we're for tea.' Demetra laughed, winking at Marcus who seemed to begin adjusting to his new position of official fiancé, just introduced to his future in-laws. The more he looked at them, the more he thought about himself of being lucky to be connected with such a good family, in which there were care, love and friendship.

Chapter 15

Demetra slept in. When she woke up, her room was full of sun light but it was very cold. At first, she could not remember where she was but when she did, the feeling of complete happiness and security overtook her as it always was from her childhood.

She sat up in the bed. She could hear some voices coming from somewhere but she could not distinguish where these were. It was not important. She glanced at the wall clock. It was a quarter to ten. She could not believe her own eyes. Quickly, she got out from the bed and went to the bathroom. In a few minutes she was ready to go down to meet her parents and Marcus, who was placed into one of the three guest's rooms on the second floor.

When she entered the sitting room, she stopped taken aback by its cosiness. The fire was burning in the fireplace. Both men, her father and Marcus, were sitting in front of it and seemed to be having a vivid conversation. At her appearance, both of them turned the head to see her and smiled. Their smiles were identical, she thought, breaking into a cheerful laugh.

'What's wrong?' They asked her together making her laugh louder.

'Nothing.' She tried to suppress her joyful mood.

'We're afraid you'd stay in bed up to dinner.' The father joked.

'I'm all right. Just hungry.' Demetra smiled, feeling happy to see them together.

'There is a remedy for it. Go to the kitchen, your mother is there.' Fedor said.

'See you then.' She left the room at once.

She walked on the long corridor; almost identical to hers back in Viking Wish and at the end of it was the kitchen. It was assembled same way as hers and if not for the different colour of the curtains, she could think she was in her own house.

'Oh, sleepy head, I was ready to go upstairs to wake you up if it wasn't for the men. Both of them dissuaded me from doing it. They were sure you were so tired that you needed more time to rest. You, a young woman, should be stronger than me and I never sleep up to ten.'

'Mamma, could I have something to bite? I am so hungry. I'd like some coffee.' She pleaded ignoring her mother's words. Elena sighed and began to prepare the breakfast for her daughter.

Demetra sat at the kitchen table in the centre of the room. She didn't have to wait too long for her mother to put in front of her what she liked. She ate the hot cereal porridge, bread with butter and her beloved strawberry jam and drank hot strong coffee, the same as she has had every day in Viking Wish; she used the same brand as her parents.

'Thanks. It was delicious.'

'I knew you'll want the same that you've always had when you're with us. I kept that jam especially for you. Wild strawberries are getting rarer with each year. I don't know for how long I'll be able to make the jam. But you know me, I'll be making it as long as I can get at least two kilos of fruit.' Elena was so happy to be with her daughter even for such a short time.

'I'll be back to help you.' Demetra rose from her seat.

'I love you.' She added and kissed her mother on her cheek. She left the kitchen to join the men near the fire.

She found them as before, sitting on each side of the fireplace and discussing something. She caught the word "leeches" and knew their journey was the subject. Marcus must be telling to her father about their adventures and explaining why they had arrived late, after dark.

'Here you are.' Fedor welcomed her cheerfully.

'What are you talking about?' Demetra started without preliminaries.

'Nothing special.' Marcus replied.

'I want to join your cosy fire camp.' She insisted.

'You're welcome.' Her father said. He took the tongs and moved some pieces of wood. 'We must never put it off. I know you're always cold. I've lightened the fire at eight and as you can feel it's quite warm here.'

'All right, I got your message. You don't care for me to share your conversation. I don't care for staying in the kitchen. The only alternative I've got is to go out for a walk to enjoy the beauty of winter.' Demetra stated and turned to leave the room.

'Don't take it bad. We're just speaking about a few things that might help us to know each other better. He,' Fedor pointed at Marcus, 'will soon be your husband and a member of our family, and he's entitled to know about us it as much as possible.' The father tried to discharge the tense atmosphere. Demetra was a master at creating it.

'Thanks for your explanation, but I won't change my mind as I've already made it up.' She finalized, reaching the threshold.

'You're not going anywhere alone. I won't let you.' She heard Marcus's voice.

'Why not?' Demetra got stubborn. 'I was born here. I know each tree and lake and turn and corner.'

'I don't doubt it, but after speaking with your father and getting the real picture of the doings here, you're not allowed to make not even one step out from this house alone. Especially, now, in winter.'

'Am I? Just try to stop me.' Demetra got furious. She turned around and went to the closet for her overcoat. She would not listen to his nonsense. She was not his wife yet, and maybe never would be, she decided.

She reached for the closet and opened it wide. In that moment, she heard someone was behind her and heard Marcus's whisper: 'Demetra, it's for your own good.' She turned to face him.

'Did you say "for my own good"? Excuse me, what's wrong with a morning walk around the house? I don't mind to get some snow on my boots. But I mind to be discriminated by anyone, especially, by you.'

'Your father told me all about the "OFF LIMITS zone". It is much more serious than I thought before. There have been already some cases of people disappearing. No one ever saw them afterwards. Your father said one of the missing persons is your girlfriend Olga.'

'Olga? I don't believe it.' She said but this time with less assurance. Quickly, she went to her father.

'Is it true that Olga disappeared?' She asked her father. She read his answer in his eyes.

'How? When? Why didn't you tell me about it when I was here?' she cried. All her arrogance disappeared replaced by profound pain and desperation.

'I wanted to tell you but, somehow, didn't have the courage. Your stay was short; I didn't want to ruin your happiness here with bad news.' He explained to her.

'I didn't want to ruin your happiness.' Demetra mimicked him. 'On the first morning I went to my favourite lake and I was booted by one of those military. When I came back, I was busy with birthday's preparations and the next day we have had that special talk between us, which made me to forget to tell you about the OFF LIMITS zone. I was so overwhelmed by your revelations that I couldn't recover myself for at least two months. I couldn't keep such news to myself. It was too horrible. I confided to Marcus.'

'I've told your father about it. He comprehended your situation.' Marcus added.

'I still cannot be locked here,' she insisted again, 'I have the right to know the truth.' The men gave up.

'You're stubborn as my grandfather. You should have been born a man, not a woman.' The father uttered at last.

'I'll tell her everything myself, I guess it's better this way.' Marcus said to him. Then he turned to Demetra: 'where could we talk in private?'

'Up, in my rooms.'

'Let's go there.' He took her by the hand. Without resistance,

she went with him leaving Fedor alone silently, looking at them before turning to the fireplace.

They came to her library next to her bedroom on the first floor. She sat at her desk and he took the seat in the armchair facing her.

'Well?' She prompted him.

'Your father told me an incredible story. About a year ago, this area in the radius of thirty kilometres was declared a military zone, off limits. Residents have the right to move freely; of course The State issued them special permissions to go to the forest and lakes. Anyone who disobeyed the orders was to be persecuted. Non-residents were banned permanently from this area. Then, some people began to disappear. The list of missing local residents is impressive. Seven are missing. All requests about them were left unanswered.' Marcus stopped and looked at Demetra strangely.

'Don't look at me like that. I didn't commit any crime,' she revolted suddenly.

'I know you didn't, but I also know you were stopped by a patrol and who knows what could have happened to you,' Marcus confronted her.

'Nothing. They let me go.'

'Yes, they did. But what if they didn't?'

The horrible truth downed on her. He was right getting angry at her. Only in that moment, she realised the full danger she had faced a few months before. She then trembled, just thinking about it. The cold fear took over her.

'I guess I was too hard on you. I didn't mean to terrify you.' Marcus was apologetic.

'You succeeded at that.' Demetra's eyes were full of tears. She looked miserable. He rose and went to her. Taking her arm, he pulled her up. She did not resist. He took her into his arms and held her close to his chest. She could hear his heart beating, strong and fast. He kissed her on her hair and whispered: 'I don't

want to lose you. You're the most precious thing that I've ever had in my life. We're facing a hard time now.'

'Why me? My life was quiet and comfortable. I had no enemies, not many friends either. I loved my things, my house, my work, and the history of my ancestors. What did I do wrong to get in all this trouble?' She lamented.

'We're all born with our destiny prepared for us. No one can escape what is written. Your destiny was to meet me and go on together to face all that'll come on our way.' He comforted her gently.

'My head is spinning from all these new things that fell on me recently. I don't know how to cope with all of this. If Barbò will tell me I'm a slave, what do I do?'

'I wish I could tell you it's not going to last long, but I cannot. It's just the beginning. Beginning of the end, although I don't know the end of what. Future is uncertain and for sure, much worse than our present. You must be strong to survive all the hardships prepared for us.' Marcus stated firmly.

'I am not afraid of hard life. Stakhanò are used to face many difficulties, but of a different type. I am a survivor, but you should teach me how to face those new things we've never had here, I mean, revolts, crime and etc.'

'I will. We are on the break of civil war, which is the most dangerous of all wars. There is no escape when the country is in turmoil and without rulers.'

'I don't think we'll get to it yet.' Demetra refused categorically.

'I must agree with you on that. For sure, if the war breaks down, it won't be before our wedding and honeymoon.' He assured her, pulling her closer to him.

'I hope so.' She murmured softly, succumbing to his caresses. He placed his finger under her chin and gently lifted her head to see her eyes. They looked at each other for a long time speaking without words. Then he lowered his head and brushed his lips with hers. Then he kissed her on her mouth, putting into it all his desires and hopes of fast reunion.

'Demetra, Marcus, lunch is ready.' Elena called them briskly interrupting their tète-*à*-tète.

'What's the time? Demetra got free from him.

'One o'clock.'

'I cannot believe we've been over an hour here.'

'Why not? Russians saying Lovers don't notice the time.' Marcus smiled.

'That's about who's in love…' Demetra started but he stopped her with a quick kiss.

'Let's go downstairs, unless you want your parents to worry about you behaviour with your fiancé, I mean, with me.' He joked.

'Don't speak nonsense. They trust you.'

'Why?'

'You know why.' She lifted her eyebrows in reply.

'Food is getting cold.' They heard Elena's voice again.

This time they didn't waist a moment and rushed out from the room together, without waiting for the third call.

As soon as lunch was over, Demetra offered to go out and have a walk. She wanted him to be acquainted with the town where she grew up.

Lapland Cave could hardly be called a village but as to be called a town, it sounded as someone's joke. The centre was a big round square encircled by single detached houses; in one of those lived Demetra's parents. Behind there was an asphalt road, separating them from the second circle of houses. All together, there were four circles, each having an asphalt road behind it. From the square, there were four radial roads, crossing all circles and stopping near the forest.

'It's a spider web design.' Marcus concluded.

'I guess you're right. I've never thought about that before.' Demetra agreed.

They were walking on the square, cleared from the snow. The high snow banks were on its sides.

'It's beautiful here. And the mountains.' Marcus admired.

'Now it's out of question but when we'll return in the summer, I'll show you our forest and my lake where I used to swim.' She promised to him.

'We'll see.' His voice sounded sarcastic reminding her about the "OFF LIMITS zone".

They turned into one of the radial roads and walked straight towards the forest. The town was fully deserted, but the smoke coming from the chimneys. The snow banks on each side prevented them to see the other houses and get a glimpse some movement behind the window curtains.

'Don't forget, most of the population here are retired Stakhanò who went to work to industrial areas or administrative centres and then returned to their homes.'

'It sounds as the old-good times.' He remarked.

'For them it is. I'm planning to do the same.'

'We'll see about that. Don't you think it's quite early to speak about it? You've just started your career, not speaking about pending matrimony.'

'But I wish I could be out of that machinery noise, obligations in front of others, continuous obedience to my superiors. I'm already sick and tired of that all.' Demetra lamented.

'Be happy you're not Barbò. Look at them. Do you want to be weak as a vegetable? Feather-brained? Humble and obliged to peremptory comply with any regulations, whatever crazy they are? Do you remember that the law about plant pots on windowsill states that they must be placed seven and half centimetres from the iron bar that secured them from falling down? I'll never forget those poor Barbò, called on meetings to discuss the installation of those iron bars, which must be three centimetre thick, black coloured and so on. Every Barbò obeyed to it, even if some of them didn't care for plants placed on windowsill. It's stupidity for you, Stakhanò, but for Barbò it's the reality of life.' He concluded his long speech in a voice full of anger.

'Ah, Barbò again. Which whatever we start to speak of, we always

finish with Barbò. If they didn't like their life, they could have revolted a long time ago.' She glanced at her wristwatch. It was half passed three. Too early to return home, she thought.

Meanwhile, they reached the end of the radial road and stopped on the crossing with a circular one, behind of which was the boreal forest. It was the best time to admire the tall majestic pines, whose branches were covered with thick snow. It was brilliantly reflecting the sun light, making the joyful atmosphere of that season.

'I love northern winter, despite of its cold and short daytime light. I love skiing. I got on the skis at the age of three. Every year there was a competition for each age group. Needless to say, I've never won any prize, but it was not important. The important was to participate and to know how to ski.' Demetra smiled looking into the woods.

'I've never liked winter sports, although I passed the tests for each of them, as required.' Marcus said and glanced in both sides wondering which way was closer to her house. The daylight was now quickly disappearing and in half an hour would have been completely dark and much colder.

'What are you thinking about?' Demetra asked him. 'You weren't listening to me? What's wrong with you?' He nodded to her, admitting being busy with his own thoughts.

'It's getting late. We must return home. Which way is shorter?'

'It's strange but I don't see the direction sign to our skiing area.' Demetra said suddenly. She glanced around wondering if she was mistaken about the place. 'It has always been here. You cannot see the road leading to it, it's covered by snow but, if you look carefully, you can notice the distances between the pines are greater in this area than in others. It means here passes the road leading to the mountains and to the skiing area.' She explained. Then all of the sudden, she turned to him saying quickly: 'Let's go home, immediately.'

'What's wrong with you?' It was his turn to ask her. He glanced at her face and noted the strange expression.

'I'll tell you everything there.' She was serious and gloomy.

Marcus was curious to know what it was. She turned to the left and began to walk faster, without looking if he was following her.

'Stop for a second. We cannot run as two crazy people. Somebody may see us and think "what's happened to those two",' he said, reaching her in a few wide strides. He took her by the hand and held it for a moment, as in attempt to break her speedy walk.

'We must return at once. I have something to tell you. I can do that only at home.' She blurted out continuing to move.

'All right. Let's do it.' He gave up to slow her down. They reached the house in a few minutes. At the ringing of the doorbell, Fedor opened the door.

'Are you still alive? I thought you'd be frozen by now. You have been out there over an hour. Did you see something interesting?' He enquired them right away

'Sorry, papa. I cannot speak to you now. We need to solve one problem. We'll be back in half hour.' Demetra interrupted him. And as she was, with the overcoat and hat on, she just removed her snow-covered boots and went directly to her library.

'And you?' Fedor looked at Marcus who stood motionless at the entrance with the door still opened. 'Close the door at least.' Fedor told him disappointed at his passive response.

Obeying to the old man, Marcus closed the main door and did exactly what Demetra did. He removed his huge winter boots, placed them next to hers and turned to Fedor.

'We'll be back soon. I must follow my fiancée.' He grinned at him and went to the stairs, still with his overcoat and hat on.

When Marcus entered the library, Demetra leaned on the back of her armchair waiting for him. He stood in front of her desk and looked directly at her.

'Marcus.' She called him and then continued in the sign language. 'Ever since that day I was booted out by soldiers from the "OFF LIMITS zone", in the back of my mind I had a persistent thought: why the State Committee created that military zone. I think I now know why.'

'Well?'

'Our beloved President has hidden something in the mountains.' Demetra signed profusely.

'Mountains?' He asked in the same language.

'There was no sign to the skiing area, because there is no such area anymore. It was prohibited to residents, meaning there is something which must not be seen by anyone.'

'I agree with you.'

'What you don't know is that these mountains are known for its deep caves. Many years ago, when there were the construction of the skiing area, heavy building machinery had been brought up to the mountains to smooth the ground and make artificial slope for going down on skis; one of the bulldozers made the ground to collapse with its weight and it fell down into the cave. Due to that, our caves were discovered and ever since then there were many excursions into them, until they were mapped in full. Those caves were formed by the dissolution of limestone due to the weak acids formed by carbon dioxide, dissolving in groundwater. Since the dissolution process takes place deep in the bedrock, it is not necessary that solution caves have entrances. Ours didn't.' Demetra stopped waiting for his questions.

'Well? I don't see a connection yet.' Marcus admitted.

'Think for a second. You must see it.' Demetra lifted her eyebrows. Then she signed quickly: 'someone can be interested in our…' Hardly had she finished her sentence, he was quickly continuing her phrase: '…caves.' It was clear as crystal, everything fell in its place.

'Anyway, I'm sure the State is using our caves for something.' Demetra signed firmly.

'Why should they do it? They could build the State deposit anywhere in this country. I don't see why they would want to come here, to the extreme northern part and build it inside mountain caves.' Marcus was not convinced by her words.

'It must be something special they are afraid to lose. Only in

deep caves inside mountains someone can hide something which may survive anything, including nuclear bombing.' Demetra said.

'Not nuclear. It's too farfetched. You forgot about Afghanistan, when by extensive bombing of Tora Bora all Taleban's' caves were destroyed.'

'But I wasn't thinking about methodical, savage bombing. I meant if someone by chance would lose some bombs. In that case, only the caves can be a safe place, where the precious things are kept. I wonder what's in there.' Demetra said clicking in Marcus's mind the word "precious".

Ever since that day when for the first time he thought about who was supporting the country economically, he always had had in the back of his mind the same question. He thought about everything: drugs, illegal arms, diamonds, and gold. Any of those were worth to keep in saving. But was it really worth enough to upkeep half a million people for seventy five years?

'What are you thinking about? You didn't answer my question.'

'Nothing.' He replied rising from the chair. He began to walk up and down across the room, periodically glancing at her bookcases and paintings hanged on the walls. In that moment, his mind was browsing in its storage files, looking for the answer to the question: what could be so precious to be hidden in those caves and what if there was a connection with that and economically maintaining the country? Then his fleeting glance rested on the vase placed on the high base. All of the sudden, he summed up its uniqueness. It was an antique Nipponese funeral urn made by Satsuma. For sure, it was not old enough to be confiscated by the State, but it was an antique piece anyway.

He turned to Demetra abruptly.

'I think I've figured out what can be in those caves.' He replied to her in sign language. She began to gesticulate to him, but he stopped her at once. 'Don't ask me what. Let me think it over and when I'm ready I'll tell you all.'

When she opened her mouth to say something, he quickly covered it up with his hand.

'Not a word.' He signed to her reminding her about the listening devices, which they didn't consider for the last two days.

'What are you going to do about it? Are you going to search the caves? If you are, I'm going with you. I'm the one who gave you this idea and I'm entitled to be involved in its realisation.' She was determined.

'We'll see about that. First, I must develop a plan. When I'll have it, we'll decide on what to do next,' he replied. She nodded wondering if he'll include her into his scheme and if not on how to force him to do so.

* * *

It was their fourth day in Lapland Cave. There were no more discussions about "OFF LIMITS zone" and the caves. Demetra was patiently waiting the moment when he would reveal his plans. She saw him twice locked with her father in his study. She had made up her mind to follow him being constantly ready to put on her overcoat at any moment and run after him outside, if needed. The most difficult time for her was at night. She lay awake for hours listening to each sound coming from the top and trying to figure out if he had retired for the night or prepared to leave alone. It was crazy of her to think such a thing, but knowing her father's extensive protection over her, she was concerned it could be the same with Marcus.

As soon as she finished her breakfast (she was late and had it in the kitchen alone), Demetra went up to her library and sat near the window. She slept badly and woke up more tired than before going to bed. Her mood was down. She felt the anxiety of the last two days beginning to take its toll on her. She didn't feel like speaking to anyone, especially to Marcus, who behaved like he was her father's guest, spending all his time with him and leaving her completely to herself.

She looked through the window, but the sight of the grey sky

and snow falling slowly to the ground didn't improve her depressed mood.

All night, the sound of wind sung its sad melody, which Demetra could not endure ever since her childhood. It always awoke the gloomy thoughts, which nagged her long after the wind was gone. That day was no different from the others.

In two days it would have been the New Year, but no one in that house seemed to remember it. Demetra loved New Year's Eve, which was the most important event for her. She believed, the moment the pointers of the clock would cross the twelfth hour, all bad and wrong would be gone and a new beautiful life would have been waiting for her in the coming year. As a true Slav person, she believed in the brighter future and to brush aside any problem as a temporary setback.

'Are you sleeping with your eyes open?' Demetra jolted at the loud voice behind her.

'You startled me. You should never come in like that. Somebody could get a heart attack.' Demetra snipped at Marcus, who appeared so unexpectedly in her room. She turned her back at him and continued to look outside.

'Don't take it in such way. I've called you twice, but you didn't hear. I came closer to see what was wrong with you, but you just sat quietly looking outside.' Marcus apologised. She kept silent.

'Don't bother to come here. I'm all right. Go; continue with the tète-a-tète with my father.' She replied stubbornly staring through the window.

'Look at me, please. It's important,' he begged her. Reluctantly, she turned.

'I've a plan already.' He said in the sign language and bending to her, he kissed her lightly on the head.

'Really?' She quickly rose, immediately forgetting about everything except his news. She looked at him knowing she could read the truth on it. He was smiling. His eyes shone and she read triumph there. She was then sure he had something in his mind.

Smiling at her, he began in the sign language: 'your father and I decided to explore those caves. It's the only way to find out the truth. Our plan is ready. We'll leave at New Year's Eve. You and your mother will stay at home and be our cover-up. Anybody passing by asking for Fedor, you'll say he's ill and in bed with a cold.'

'No. It's not what I want. I'm going with you.' She signed. The stubborn determination on her face.

'You cannot. Someone must know where we are in case we'd be lost or disappear. Fedor doesn't want your mother to know about the caves. You're the only one who knows. Please.' He almost pleaded with her. Then he took her into his arms and kissed her, the way he did in Thomas's closet several months before. She knew she should not refuse that kind of plea, but she did.

'I'm going with you. I must.' She signed firmly and looked into his eyes. They looked into each other's and each of them thought that that expedition was a milestone in their life. Marcus understood her desire and determination. With a heavy heart, he agreed with her. The next moment, her eyes changed from sad to happy and she did the thing, which was strictly prohibited in Karsland: she hugged him passionately. He had no other choice but to kiss her again and again and then suddenly dropped his arms.

'By the way, I spoke with your father,' Marcus said in a loud voice, 'he agreed for us to be married after the New Year festivities. Do you agree?' He took her into his arms again. She was ready to agree to anything, now that she knew she'd be with him in that dangerous adventure.

'Of course, unless… we'll be delayed.' She whispered to him.

'Don't joke with serious things.' He set her aside and continued in the sign language: 'We must be back before dawn or we will never comeback.'

'Don't say such things. Everything will be alright, I can feel it.' She signed back to him.

* * *

The following two days were spent in the last preparations for the New Year's celebrations, although each of them knew that New Year's Eve would have been a disaster, no one ever mentioned it. The beautiful pine decorated the old-fashioned way was already in the sitting room on the day of their arrival. The house was decorated, cleaned and aired in anticipation of the holiday. There was really nothing to do except cooking and baking some torts and pies. Elena was good at that by then, although she didn't have time for it when she used to work.

'May I steal this girl for a few minutes?' Marcus asked Elena, who was removing a meat pie from the oven in that moment. It was hot there and the delicious aroma of meat and spices filled the air.

'You can have her for as long as my next pie is baking in the oven. Then I'll need her for making cookies.' She replied not moving her eyes from the pie.

'I'm ready. What's so urgent?' Demetra asked, wiping her hands on the towel and putting it on top of the counter. She was the picture of happiness, Marcus thought. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were burned from the heat of the kitchen. She had a smear of flour on her forehead and a smaller one on the tip of her straight cute nose.

'I want to tell you something,' he said trying to sound carefree.

'Let's go to my library,' she offered.

'Let's join your father in the sitting room. It's warmer than upstairs,' he said. They left the kitchen.

The sitting room was the main centre of the house. The father sat on the low stool, as usual, near the fireplace taking care of the fire, which was quite a busy task.

'Hi, papa. How is wood today? Is it still humid or you've managed to dry it up at last?' She greeted him taken the place on the sofa.

'Well, what's next?' She looked at Marcus waiting for his next move.

'Your father and I have discussed some points. I thought it will

be best to let you know them.' Marcus said giving her two sheets of paper. She recognised her father handwriting on one of them.

'I agree with him completely.' Fedor confirmed nodding in the direction of the younger man. 'Read it. It's for you.' Suddenly her heart quivered making her hesitant to read it.

'Don't be afraid. There is nothing bad for you. Read it.' Fedor insisted noticing her reluctance. Demetra began to read the first sheet. There was the following:

'I, Fedor Petrovich Breloff, am appointing my daughter, Demetra Fedorovna Breloff, to be the only heir to whatever I own.' It was signed and dated as of today.

Then she turned to the second sheet which was the same short will but this time of Marcus. Demetra finished the reading. She lifted her head and both men saw tears running down her cheeks. She looked very miserable.

'Don't take it in such way. You're my only child. In case something goes wrong, I must make arrangements.' The father comforted her but it didn't help.

'And you?' She turned to her fiancé. 'You're not obliged to leave me anything. You have your brother.'

'Why not? You're my future wife. If we're meant to get married, we will. If something happens to me, it's my fault alone and you should never suffer from my imprudence. This is why I'm obliged to leave you all that I have.' Marcus explained and then he added: 'I know you love the art. I've always thought of leaving my paintings to someone who knows the art and appreciates it. I know you do. I noticed on my first visit to your house that you have some beautiful antique paintings. I knew you'd love them. Maybe my paintings are not antique, but I've made them out of my love for the art.'

Now Demetra was crying loudly.

'What's going on here?' Elena entered the room. Quickly she went to her daughter and hugged her affectionately.

'Oh, my dear. What did they say to make you so sad?' She asked gently still holding the girl very tightly.

'I've read those papers.' Demetra murmured into her mother's chest.

'That's all? Such an expensive present for the New Year made you so unhappy. Well, I thought you'd be wiser and more mature than you are.' Elena reprimanded her.

Demetra lifted her head and moved slightly away from her mother. She wanted to see her in the face. The big blue eyes of Elena were serious, not a trace of joke. Demetra's eyes dried up at once. Suddenly she saw herself from outside, a grown-up woman behaving as a little girl. Where was her self-esteem and control? She glanced around noting the sad face of her father and the surprise on Marcus's. She didn't care for looking, ridiculous especially in front of her dearest people.

She rose and went to the fireplace. Taking the empty armchair across her father's, she managed to smile to him: 'Thanks for your generosity.' Then she looked at Marcus and added: 'Thanks to you too. I'll do my best to preserve everything that you bestowed on me.'

'Good girl.' Fedor said reaching for her hand and squeezing it with affection.

A heavy silence fell in the room.

'Papa.' Demetra called to get his attention. As soon as he lifted his eyes to meet hers, she began in the sign language: 'I'm grateful for all that you did and do for me, but I could never be contented and satisfied with myself if I'm going to miss the exploration of those caves. It was my idea, the search of the caves, which both of you want to do, leaving me aside. All right, you can do it. But I'll go on my own because I want to see with my own eyes what's there if there's something. You cannot stop me. I know it's stupid of me, but I've become adventuress. You, Marcus, made me so. I'm going to follow my call,' she stopped. Then all of the sudden she rose from the armchair and quickly left the room, leaving all of them think on what to do next.

Chapter 16

They left the house one hour before midnight. Each of them had a pair of skies on the right shoulder and a rucksack on their backs. Marcus led their small party. Fedor was the last. Demetra was in the centre. The moon was up. Its light was brightly reflected by the snow, helping them to see their way.

Reaching the forest, they stopped and put on the skies. Then the journey into the unknown had begun. The snow was just hard enough for them to move easily, cross-country skiing was their past time occupation, and without any difficulties, they covered the distance of about two kilometres, when they reached the net indicating the beginning of the OFF LIMITS zone.

As was agreed, they moved in silence and at the sight of the net they stopped and looked at each other. Each of their movements was planned. Marcus retrieved an ammeter from his pocket and went to the net. The test on voltage was negative. They breathed the sigh of relief. Then Fedor took out from one of his pockets the wire cutter and cut off a hole, big enough for them to get through. Slowly, one by one they passed through it, finding themselves on the other side.

Fedor looked carefully around and pointed in the direction they had to move to. They put on the skies again and resumed their run, but Fedor was leading now. They had covered not more than a hundred meters when suddenly something dark rose in front of them. Fedor stopped and turned to Demetra. He showed his thumb up which was their signal that they were near the caves. Demetra looked at Marcus who seemed to be preoccupied with something. He put his finger to his lips, which was the signal for staying silent, someone was nearby. Then he signalled to put on their ski masks to secure their anonymity. Demetra complied, al-

though she could not hear anything. She glanced at her father, who was already with his ski mask on. As she glanced at him, he brought his finger to his lips, as Marcus did. She felt the goose skin running on her back. On impulse, she turned back but stopped at once cursing herself for acting so silly. They stood motionless for a long time, Demetra thought, until both men removed their fingers from their lips. She was cold by then and impatiently waiting for the next signal. When it came, they slowly moved forward. Reaching the rocks of the mountains, they removed the skies. It was then Demetra's job to carry the skies. She put all three pairs on her right shoulder. They were quite heavy, but she didn't dare to complain, it was her choice to join them.

Fedor proceeded slowly, periodically touching the rocks with his gloved hand. At last, he stopped and signalled them to come closer. They did so. Demetra saw the dark opening big enough for an adult to squeeze into. She doubted that there was a cave, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Fedor was the first to disappear in the opening, followed by Marcus and the last was Demetra, who left the skies at the entrance.

After walking for a few metres in a narrow passage, which widened at the end, they entered into a big cave with a high ceiling and ice-covered walls. It was very cold in there and almost completely dark but of some light coming from somewhere. They still didn't speak afraid of the echo.

Silently Fedor led them deeper and deeper into the mountain. The cave seemed to stretch indefinitely and there was getting lighter with each moment. After a while, Demetra heard a strange sound that reminded her of the sound of a ventilator or of helicopter propellers. Then they entered into a huge area full of light. Fedor stopped and turned to them. He removed his glove and showed two fingers up in sign of victory, which meant they had reached their destination. Then he lifted his eyebrows, in a silent question: what will come next? It was the turn of Marcus then, to decide and lead their expedition. Marcus moved forward, taking

the place next to Fedor. He smiled reassuringly to Demetra. Then he examined the wall which was in front of them.

At first sight, it looked as made of ice but at a closer study, the wall seemed of being made from some metal sheets, which were reflecting the light. As an engineer, Demetra concluded that behind those artificially built walls must be located some equipment, possibly ventilation and heating systems, identified by the sound of motors. She pulled Marcus by his sleeve that turned at once and looked at her. She moved her lips and he read the word "ventilation". He nodded in agreement. Then he turned again to the wall and began slowly to advance to its right. Looking for an entrance, Demetra figured it out. She followed him like a shadow. As they went on, Demetra heard some voices. There were some people, she thought.

Marcus stopped, pointing to the wall and then lifted his eyebrows as to say 'what now'? Fedor took from his pocket a small hammer, offering to test the wall. Marcus moved his head negatively. Demetra thought he was concerned about the workers on the other side. Then he began to walk on again, along the wall. He reached its end and turning around the corner, discovered a narrow passage created between the man-made wall and the natural curve of the cave. It was big enough to get into and move slowly forward. The light was passing through the wall, easing their advance. Finally, they could see what was in front of them. Marcus entered the passage, then Demetra and Fedor was the last. They could hear loud voices coming through the wall. It was a boiling room, Demetra guessed.

At last, Marcus reached the end of the tunnel but stopped a few metres before. He saw they had reached the main entrance to the cave. He guessed that the checkpoint was on his right and on the left was a wide corridor leading somewhere. Turning to Demetra he brought his finger to his lips and made the big eyes which meant she and Fedor had to stay here and wait for him.

Then he began to cross at turtle's speed the last few meters sep-

arating him from the opening. Several times, he leaned against the cave wall, listening to any sound coming from ahead. When he finally reached its designation, he stopped and waited for a long time, as Demetra thought, before peeping out. He glanced in both directions, and then suddenly leaving the passage, he stepped out on the road. Without turning his head, he waved at them to join him. Demetra didn't wait for a second invitation. She moved at all speed in the passage, hearing behind her the heavy breathing of her father. Soon she stood next to Marcus.

She looked around with curiosity. They were standing on the concrete floor of the huge fabricated facilities, built inside a gigantic natural solution cave. The walls and the ceiling were of the same metal as they had seen earlier. The industrial-type light fixtures hung from the ceiling brightly illuminating the area. The exhaust pipes of various sizes ran above them at different heights, not mentioning some black boxes uniformly placed on the walls. It had to be CCTV systems, Demetra decided, and wondered why the emergency alarm had not gone off on yet. For sure, security guards had spotted their presence. The end of the wide corridor separating the metal walls running forward was lost somewhere ahead. She could not see where it leads.

Immediately, the three of them began to move quickly forward, keeping to the side of their entrance. They could hear the loud voices coming from both sides.

After about fifty metres, they saw across the corridor a half-opened door. Marcus signed to them to wait. He crossed swiftly to the other side and once he reached the door stopped before it. Demetra thought it took an infinite time before he decided to peep out through the doorframe. As soon as he did, he waved at them. Then he went in. Demetra followed him and she heard her father's steps behind her. She entered and stopped in astonishment. Three walls of the huge area were covered by CCTV screens. There were hundreds of them, each registering something, blinking red, green or yellow, reminding her of traffic con-

trols. She would have laughed at that resemblance, if it was not for their precarious situation. The control panels ran along those walls and there were control desks which they clearly identified as the Operator Control Area.

The room was deserted. The sound of joyful celebration coming from the next area, the door to which was in the far end, explained plainly why there was no one in there. Everybody went where the table with drinks, food and so on was set. They're lucky that day, she thought, glancing at Marcus who seemed not to have lost time, being already at one of the operator's desks and typing something on one of the keyboards. Demetra followed his example by taking a place at the nearest desk. In front of her was a twenty-four inch screen, touch-on type. On impulse, she stretched her hand to check it with her finger, but her sixth sense stopped her from doing so. She remembered that each citizen's fingerprints were catalogued and probably stored right there. She looked down and saw a keyboard tucked between some files, which were carelessly left by someone. She pulled it out and together with the board, she retrieved some papers. Shifting them carelessly with her forearm, she glanced at them and the word "art" caught her attention. She picked up the sheets to have a look at them, when someone touched her on her shoulder. She jolted in terror but the gloved hand pressed on her mouth and silenced her loud shouting. Someone turned her around. Of course, who could have done such thing to her if not her fiancé? Shortly, he pulled her closely to him, as apologizing for his rough treatment, then let her free signing to look up on her left. She did so.

There were CCTV screens, which she ignored at the beginning. However, as he pointed to one of them, Demetra looked carefully and saw there was a passage between shelves and on each of them she was able to spot some marble busts and other marble figures. She turned to Marcus but he was busy with a computer. She looked at the other screen. There was a passage again but on the shelves were gold masks, gold statutes and some other fig-

ures, which she managed to spot there. She moved her eyes to the third, and again there was a passage and shelves full of some kind of various iron things.

Those were artefacts, the thought run through her. Stupefied by her discovery, she stood dumbfound, not knowing what to do next.

Then someone pulled her by her sleeve. She was too astounded to get horrified this time. She turned and saw it was Marcus who signed to her to go. Her father was already near the entrance door, waiting for them.

Without losing more time, Demetra rushed to him, Marcus behind her. They were out in the corridor but this time they ran openly towards their passage without worrying of being spotted by someone. Some strange feeling was pushing Demetra to run behind of her father at all speed, being so afraid to lag and being caught, right when they had discovered the secret of the cave.

In a few minutes, they left behind the man-made facilities and entered the natural cave passage which brought them back. As Fedor was leading them to the exit, the darkness gradually took over and with it the silence and eeriness of the cave. It was difficult to believe then that, somewhere inside, there were some installations that employed such a great number of people. Demetra didn't care for anything now. Her only concern was to return home in safety as fast as possible. The fresh breeze announced them that they were near the exit at last.

With huge relief, the three of them found themselves outside. The moon was still on and its light was still reflecting the snow and making their way back easier. In one quick move, they put on the skies and began their return journey. The difference was that they were then afraid of being stopped. But now they wanted everyone to know about their discovery.

They were crossing the country in a complete silence; the only sound that could be heard in the depth of the night was that of the skies, on the New Year Eve night, Demetra thought. Forcing herself to keep the pace with men, not wanting to get them in trouble

with her slowness exhausted her. She knew they had to get out of there as fast as possible.

It was almost four o'clock when they were reached home. They entered the house from the back door, dropped on the floor all their outdoor clothes and boots, and went directly to the sitting room, none of them pronounced a word. Demetra plonked herself into the sofa and leaned on its back, closing her eyes. She was at the end of her physical strength but she was proud of herself for managing to do such thing. She opened her eyes at the delicious aroma of the soup. Silently, Elena carried a tray with four bowls of hot soup, which she placed on the coffee table.

'Don't speak.' Marcus signed to her. Obeying to his warning, silently she took the nearest bowl and began to consume the soup feeling it was the best meal she had ever in her life. Both men in front of her did the same.

'Happy New Year.' Elena said putting on the table another tray with champagne and four goblets.

'Happy New Year.' Three of them replied in unison but no one touched the bottle being too exhausted to open the cork.

'I have something better.' Elena said and went out returning almost at once with Cognac and four shots.

'It's better for this moment.' Fedor said taking the bottle and pouring the liquor to each of them.

'Happy New Year!' He said lifting his shot high and glancing at each of them.

'Happy New Year!' They drank, thinking how unusual it was to cheer the coming year with such strong spirits instead of champagne.

'We'll have it at dinner.' Fedor said as reading their thoughts.

'I must go to bed now.' Demetra stood up feeling her last strength sipped away with the drink. It was too much for her. Without hearing the other's comments, she went to the door and up to her apartments.

Reaching her bed, she undressed, dropping her things on

the floor. It was the first time in her life she didn't care for anything but the bed. Tomorrow would have been another day, she thought, closing her eyes and falling into a deep profound sleep.

* * *

'Wake up, sleepyhead.' Demetra heard a voice coming from far away. She brushed aside that monotonous, insisting voice but it didn't leave her in peace.

'Wake up sleepyhead.' She heard again and felt someone was shaking her shoulder.

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. She didn't see anything except the white ceiling, and then slowly she moved her eyes and focused on someone who was unceremoniously trying to wake her up.

'Oh, mamma.' Demetra recognised at last her intruder. 'I want to sleep. Go away.'

'Oh, no. It's two o'clock. Dinnertime. You slept for ten hours; it's more than enough for New Year's Day. I'm not going to have my special dinner ruined. Not to speak of the men, who are waiting for you too.' Elena insisted.

'All right. I'll be down in ten minutes. I'll try to be fast.' Demetra sighed knowing she could not spoil her parents' celebration.

She entered the sitting room, cautiously carrying in her hands several beautifully packed boxes. 'When we're out there, we've had a visitor who left something for each of you. Happy New Year!' She smiled happily stopping for a moment being blinded by the brightness of decorations which she didn't notice the night before. In addition to the Christmas tree and several usual decorations, there were garlands running from one corner to the other, minimising the room. It felt cosy, with multicoloured ribbons and wreaths made of fresh pines, whose aroma filled the room.

'Wow, we're in the magic cave of Ali Baba.' She laughed nearing to the men who sat near the fireplace, as usual.

'Happy New Year!' She kissed her father and gave him his present. The same she did to Marcus. Both men just looked at her silently.

'What's wrong with both of you? Don't you like receiving presents?' She asked laughing at them.

'Of course, I do.' Fedor found at last his tongue. 'Thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

'Thanks. I have something for you too.' Marcus clumsy retrieved something from his pocket and gave it to her. She saw it was a small box, beautifully decorated with a pinkish ribbon.

'Don't open it.' She heard the loud warning of her mother who just then entered the room.

'Your timing is always perfect.' Demetra sounded disappointed. She didn't care for her mother's ideas to keep all the presents under the tree and open them after dinner. But there were no other choice as to obey. Reluctantly, she put the box under the tree wondering what could have been inside there. The box was too big for a ring and too small for some silver, in case.

'It's for you, mamma.' Demetra offered her present in a quite brusque manner, being still annoyed at her.

'Thank you. You're so kind and good, the same as my mother was.' Elena said with tears in her eyes. 'Your father and I prepared for both of you something too. Let's wait for dinner to open the presents.' Elena said and then added: 'Do me a favour, put it under the tree. I'll open it later on.' Demetra hugged her mother, feeling then ashamed of her thoughts of just a minute before.

She stood behind Marcus's armchair glimpsing at the fire. Looking at both of them, Fedor mused how unexplainable life was. It knew how to match the people. The couple in front of them was the most perfect couple, which he had never met in his long life of travelling. They're young, handsome and smart. He just wondered if he'd live long enough to see their children. That night's adventures left him with a pain in the heart and exceedingly tired. He knew he was no longer young to do the same as that couple in front of him, although Fedor was still regarded in his early senior years, not a senior yet.

'I've missed you very much, especially in that cold.' Marcus uttered in low voice.

'Do you want me to believe that?' Demetra laughed wondering if that terrible night they have spent in that cave was not a bad dream. But it looked like her father was right and New Year's Eve night proved to be the best for their exploration. In the end, the important thing was not to toast the midnight coming, but to the happiness of full life, as he had told her. She moved closer to Marcus until her shoulder was touching his. More than this, she didn't dare to show her feelings in front of her father. The girls of Karsland, no matter from which background, could not demonstrate her feelings and wishes. It could be the biggest offence of all. She had to always remember there is the possibility that somebody may feel uncomfortable at seeing the display of somebody's feelings.

'We might as well start with the preparations for your wedding. I guess after the dinner, it will be the best time to discuss them. There is no point to delay your matrimony, since all of us agreed to it.' The father said suddenly, making Demetra think if his decision was not caused by her behaviour.

'I wonder if it was me who…' Demetra started but Marcus interrupted her.

'It's excellent. I'm for it. I'm sure Demetra is with me,' he said quickly pushing her slightly with his elbow. She nodded at once. An awkward silence fell in the room, disrupted by the tickling of the grandfather's clock.

'What's wrong with you?' Elena entered the room. 'Your faces are so sore I could think each of you have eaten a lemon. Today is the New Year's Day and we cannot have such long faces.'

'What have you discussed without me?' She asked glancing from one to the other.

'Wedding.' Demetra managed to utter.

'Wedding? With such long faces? Did you decide not to marry?' She asked directly her daughter. But the answer was on the girl's

terrified expression. Elena was relieved. She wanted her daughter to marry a handsome, virile man who was capable, she felt it, to make her life full of adventures and amusement, and she appeared to be lucky having found all that.

Demetra turned to face Marcus and signed to him. 'I want to know what you found there. I've got some papers.'

'What papers?' She read the astonishment on his face.

'After dinner I'll give them to you. They are in one of my pockets in my parka from last night.' She signed.

'Good girl.' His eyes shone in contentment. He seemed of being satisfied and happy. She was slightly disappointed with his reaction. He seemed of being happier of some piece of paper than of being with her. All of the sudden he hugged her by the shoulders and pecked on her cheek. Then, both of them glanced quickly at Fedor who pretended not to notice their conduct.

They married on the eighth of January, the day after the Christmas day on the Russian Orthodox Church's calendar. In the past, the seventh of January was celebrated with rich liturgies, bell ringing, music, and games in the snow. In Karsland, there were no such things. It was regarded as being outdated, primitive and too old-fashioned. In the Comocratia, no one could even imagine mentioning the religion, not to speak of believing.

It was an unpardonable flamboyance and pretentiousness to have a big and lavish entertainment for Stakhanò. It was good manners for them to speak about wedding arrangements and fine outfits and elaborate dinner, but when it got to the matter, Stakhanò in general were having a small private party in the house of the fiancée where also the ceremony was performed. It was not different in Demetra's case.

At twelve o'clock sharp the clerk of the State, Mr Ben Green read to the couple standing in front of them the official document in which Demetra and Marcus were pronounced as man and wife. It was one of the blank forms filled with their names, names of their parents, their social status, the virginal status of the bride

and the date from which they were accepted as a husband and a wife.

Marcus felt so sad remembering the grand church wedding of one of his acquaintances, back in Italy. It was a real celebration with hundreds of guests and flowers and music and rice thrown on the newlyweds, once they went out from the church.

That short ceremony initiated by a solemn representative of the State's Legal Department, with his dry and official language, resembled more of an official contract of common settlement than to the loving union of a young couple. He caught the eye of Demetra who smiled happily at him and got ashamed of himself for making any comparisons, which was not the case. Brushing aside his gloomy thoughts, he was the impatient groom again who was just waiting to take his bride away.

'From this moment you're husband and wife and Stakhanò status is transferred to your children, with the hope they'll be able to keep it as well. Now the groom can kiss his bride.' Mr Green concluded. Loud applauses met his words. Marcus took his bride into his arms and kissed her the way he felt like, ignoring the sounds of surprise coming from the crowd. He cared nothing about their reaction. He felt so hungry for his bride whom he could not caress for many days during their stay in Lapland Cave.

Demetra was already trying to free herself from his arms but he held her tightly. He wanted those cool, hard-hearted, post-democratic people to see the real, alive ones who are still living in old Europe. At last, he let her go and glanced at the rest.

'Are you kidding? You cannot handle me in such way in front of people. It's not acceptable.' Demetra murmured to him.

'Not acceptable? You're my wife, and I decide how to caress you. No one can tell me how to kiss you.' He said loud enough to see some of the people raising their eyebrows.

'Don't get yourself into trouble. There are always people reporting on our behaviour. Be aware of them.' Demetra murmured bringing Marcus to their reality. He was in Karsland and in order to sur-

vive there, he had to watch out for himself twenty-four by seven. He sighed heavily. Then a wide generous smile filled his face and he made an announcement. Holding Demetra by her waist, he turned to the audience and said: 'Today is the happiest day of my life. At last, I'm in possession of this Galatea. She's mine and please, forgive me if I did something wrong. My head was spinning from the thought of being married to this beautiful, smart and intelligent girl.' At the same time, he thought about himself becoming so hopelessly hypocrite, but there was no other choice in front of him. Being married tighten his hands and he knew he had to study to live with those perfect people, manners, customs and questionable riches.

'That's enough. We know how you feel.' Fedor was pulling Marcus by his arm.

'Come here to toast to your union.' Demetra heard the voice of one of her girlfriends. Marcus took her by the elbow and propelled to the centre of the room. Someone brought them goblets with champagne.

'To your happiness!' Everybody was shouting. Under those wild sounds the newlyweds drank the bubbling liquid and kissed lightly, as was a custom.

Marcus did her justice by calling her Galatea. Demetra looked gorgeous in her wedding dress, which was of white chiffon with white roses embroidered all over it. It was long up to her ankle with long sleeves and a high collar *à* la Mary Stuart. It was her grandmother's. There was no way to get such a dress at present. The latest wave of Stakhanò customs considered the most elegant and elaborated things as extravagant and bad mannered. It was acceptable for Barbò only. Demetra knew each of Stakhanò girl dreamed to have a wedding outfit similar to Barbò's, but none of them dared to overstep acceptable standards. Demetra did. She was stunning in her grandmother's dress and added a crown of silk flowers intricately arranged on top of her head, instead of the old-fashioned veil. The colourful flowers added some pinkish colour to her white face. She was beautiful, Marcus was right.

Elena managed at last to reach her daughter. Demetra turned and her mother was near her. They hugged. Tears filled Demetra's eyes. From then on, she could not come home whenever she wanted. She could only have come at her husband's decision.

'I hope we'll see each other often.' Elena whispered as answering her daughter's thoughts.

'I hope that too. Don't worry, mamma. He's a good man, I know it. You'll see us too often till you'll tell us to come less.' Demetra joked.

'Let me say goodbye too.' Fedor forced his way through the crowd and stood near his daughter. He looked at her blushed face and said seriously: 'Demetra, you're now the wife of the man. You must be a good wife and companion. Remember, it's easy to break the vase but very difficult to put it together again.'

'I've understood you, father.' Demetra uttered and entered into her father's opened arms. She knew then he had forgiven her for that awful *Stimulazer* matter and she was again his favourite.

'We must leave now.' She heard Marcus whisper. The father let her go.

'Marcus, take care of her. She's a very fragile Galatea. Promise to me.' Fedor said looking directly at his son-in-law.

'I promise to both of you I'll take good care of her.' Marcus replied solemnly. He didn't need to say it. He knew he'd take care of her. She was his only love.

At last, the newlyweds went to the main door, which was wide opened ignoring the freezing cold, and went out. Demetra's shoes sunk at once into the snow but she bravely walked to the car laughing and waving to her guests.

'See you all soon.' She was waving to the loud crowd when Marcus pressed the gas pedal and the car swiftly moved leaving behind the good wishers. Their journey back to Viking Wish started with a two-night stop in one of the luxury hotels for their honeymoon.

Chapter 17

At the time when Demetra Breloff was busy in preparations for her wedding, her best girlfriend, Anissia Teremoff decided to take the initiative into her hands to pursue the course of investigation into that Barbò death, as she had promised to Demetra. There is a saying, "the curiosity killed the cat". Of course, Anissia could not take it seriously as any of the old-time fables. Being determined, secure of herself and stubborn, she decided to pursue her investigation by herself, being sure to succeed.

An elegant couple moved slowly in intricate steps of Argentinean tango. Both of them were tall, good-looking and stylish. The girl's light brown hair seemed much lighter in contrast with the very dark ones of her partner. Her slinky black dress accentuated the whiteness of her skin, making her partner's look darker and less auspicious. The man was bulky, but he had a very light step. He held her close to his body and led her swiftly under the rhythm of the music. They were the only couple that continued to dance.

The hall was almost empty. Few customers occupied the tables and most of them were watching the dancing couple in front of them.

The final magnificent step and the dance were over. The man propelled the girl to their table in the centre of the hall. As a perfect gallant cavalier, he sat her first. Shifting his chair close to hers the man then took his place.

'Robert, I am so thirsty.' The girl whispered into the man's ear, making him tickle all over.

'What would you like to drink, darling?'

'Whatever you want me to.' Anissia replied lowering her long lashes.

In the dim light, Robert could see her perfect profile and the mass of shining hair. The perfect oval face, huge innocent blue eyes, masses of light brown hair, long neck, feminine sloping shoulders and everything which he called beautiful and perfect was in his memory of Anissia.

He could hardly believe his luck when she agreed to dine with him. It's not that he thought of himself as ugly. Just the opposite. Mr Robert Young, the close associate to Mr Albert Issel, had a high opinion of himself. His late father was the best friend of the late Mr Issel, and together with his son, he spent his bachelor's days, going around, enjoying themselves changing one girl after the other.

Robert was the only child whom late Mr Young fathered from one Barbò. No Barbò had the right to produce a bastard. They were methodically watched and anything out of rules could be corrected in time. But for his father was made an exception and Robert came into that world. He was recognised and adopted and inherited his father's fortune. He was told to finish University; otherwise he could have not got his father's money, as was stipulated in the will. He didn't mind to study; just the opposite, he completed four different colleges.

Now at 48, Mr Robert Young was divorced and unattached. He was one of the most eligible bachelors in the country, but he didn't rush to remarry. He didn't want to make the same mistake he did the first time. He decided to take his time before marrying again. Robert liked to have in bed a mature woman with a strong, big body. Nevertheless, he preferred a beautiful woman, an innocent young girl. Anissia was such. She was not a Barbò. The girl with a PhD in Ancient Literature was much more than blue innocent eyes, and he knew it.

Sitting next to her and looking at her perfect profile, it was still difficult for him to believe that ice-queen was his, well almost his, or maybe his.

As for Anissia, she tried not to look at her escort. His red beam-

ing face boasted overindulgence and self-confidence. His look was of possession and Anissia hated all about it. She prayed that Alexis would not come in, although she knew he never frequented such places. She pushed those thoughts away, deciding to concentrate on the man sitting next to her.

She hated to be involved in anything connected to politics, but the deaths of Barbò shook her the same way as the others. Also, being acquainted with the old world through her profession, she knew better than others about the role of the brain in human's behaviour and she got curious as anyone would be to find out why the Barbò behaved as crazy before dying.

'Anissia, my dear, do you want something to eat.' Robert insinuating voice was persistent. Suppressing her forthcoming irritation, the girl smiled sweetly and shook her head negatively.

'But you must be famished.' Robert insisted.

Anissia graceful hand with well-trimmed nails reached for Robert's arm. Looking into his eyes, she murmured: 'I'm enjoying this evening so much that I'm still not hungry. I think that you're right, we should order dinner now. I was invited for dinner, wasn't I?'

Robert melted under her warm deep stare, which he mistakenly thought was promising him what he wanted. Moreover, he wanted her. He could feel himself being arisen. This girl was maddening. He took her hand with both his and slowly brought it to his mouth. Turning her palm upside he placed a hot, lingering kiss. His bold caresses were not a part of Anissia's plan. She was now very uncomfortable and tried to withdraw her hand.

'Why? Don't you like when I'm admiring you? I'm crazy about you.'

'It's getting late. Don't you think it's time to order something?" Her calm and indifferent tone cooled off Robert's desire at once. 'I should slow down with her or she may run away.' He thought, motioning to the waiter.

After a few strong drinks, Robert got talkative. Staring at the

multicoloured reflections of his whiskey on Bohemian crystal of his glass, he said philosophically: 'You know how whiskey's made?' Any drink sold to the public is made synthetically, thanks to the organic chemistry. Nothing is natural in the beverage industry. I own a few factories, which are producing the liquor and wine from grapes as it was done centuries ago. These are for us, the members of the State Committee. I always keep a few bottles at home. When we'll be there I'll let you choose which you prefer.'

'Usually, I don't drink anything stronger than coffee. But if you insist, I'll try.' Anissia smiled.

'How's your steak? Is it done, as you like?'

'Thanks, it's alright.'

They continued to eat in silence. Anissia was busy chewing the steak and wondered when could be the right moment to ask him about the twentieth century findings. Robert was still having his hopes on a friendlier ending of the evening than its beginning.

'Are you tired?' His question took her by surprise. It was out of place, she thought.

'Today I had a tiresome day. And you?' She answered politely.

'You could take tomorrow day off. Maybe we could have a picnic?'

'Picnic? I don't think it's the right time of the year for such thing.'

'I'll take you to Caribbean or Seychelles, wherever you prefer. My private jet is always ready.' Robert bragged.

'I think it's better to postpone such rendezvous. I must finish some urgent work. Usually I don't take any vacation during the year.' Anissia quickly rejected his offer. Robert shivered realising that he didn't succeed to seduce her.

'We could meet for a lunch only.' He tried again.

'Tomorrow I've a really busy day. But we could meet for tea the day after tomorrow.' Robert got furious. What this slut thought of herself?

'I've heard that not so long ago you've spent a full day with Demetra, your best girlfriend or lover.' He said, the dirtiest insult, innocently looking at her.

At first moment, Anissia was taken aback by his vulgar suggestion but she quickly regained her ground.

'She's my only girlfriend. We studied together from nursery school up to the University. There was no need to offend me in such way.' She retorted calmly.

Nevertheless, he continued his affront.

'No one heard any conversation from your house. Don't you find it strange?'

'Why? Someone is listening to my chats? I thought the secret ear dropping was prohibited in our country. It was a job during the transition period. We're in the post-democratic, I must remind you. It looks like you forgot about it.'

'No, my dear, I didn't. It was reported to me that there was no sound coming from your house. A complete silence. It could mean several things: hidden soundproof closets or lover's games when there was no need for words.' He stopped, looking meaningfully at her. Anissia felt the blush was slowly covering her cheeks.

'Stop at once. You're despicable. I…' She screamed at him forgetting where she was. In that moment, she felt the black anger, sweeping over her so suddenly she didn't have the time to think about her next step. Anissia stood up so swiftly that her chair fell down with such loud noise, that many customers turned their heads to see what was going on.

'You. You're the most vicious man I've ever met. You're a dirty jerk,' she continued to shout. Suddenly she came back to her senses and realised she had made an exhibition of herself.

'I hate you.' She whispered to him and then glanced at the fork and knife, which she still held in her hands. She threw them on the table and quickly grabbing her evening bag, she ran from the hall. Robert bent his head for not meeting the eyes of the people who saw his shame. It was the deepest insult to the man, when a lady ran away from him.

He swore to himself that she would pay a high price for such offence.

* * *

Demetra's heart pinched hardly at the sight of her neat lawn covered by light snow. It was so dear to her. That time, she felt a real home coming. She knew she had left behind the easy maiden days and from then on she was a wife and had all responsibilities on her shoulders. She wondered if the State would allow her to stay in that house or move her to another, in the area with other Stakhanò families who have children. Generally, the State preferred to keep segregate areas by family status. It was not called "segregation", which may remind some awful things from the past, it was then called "a concern about children's growing-up habits". The children must have others to play together with. The real reason was money, as usual in those cases. It was much cheaper for the State to maintain population by area assigned by family status.

Demetra sighed heavily thinking about Thomas, whom she'll lose if she'd move away.

'Why such a sad face? What are you thinking about?' Marcus was concerned about her.

'Nothing. I don't want to move from this house.'

'We can stay here. I'm not going to insist to move to my place. We'll stay where you prefer. I don't really care.'

'It's not that. I thought the State would give us the new quarters in one of the family areas. We're married now and everyone expects us to have children. Those who have children live in the area with others who have children as well.'

'It's too early to speak about children. Don't you agree with me?' Marcus took her hand and squeezed it slightly. Demetra nodded and blushed, remembering their first nuptial night.

As soon as they stepped in, Marcus went to collect their luggage. Meantime Demetra took off her coat and heavy boots and changed into her dressing down.

'I've brought in everything that was in the car.' She heard his voice and went quickly to the sitting room.

'Let's eat some leftovers from the trip. I've seen some sandwiches and apples.' Marcus said quickly taking off his coat.

'I thought of cooking something hot. It's too cold for a sandwich only.' Demetra said.

'I cannot wait. I must leave at once. Don't worry. Take your time in arranging our things and preparing dinner. I'll be back for it. Where is that sandwich?' Marcus said and went to the baskets.

'Let me do it.' Demetra said picking up one of the baskets. 'Come to the kitchen. There is no space in here.' She glanced at the various suitcases and bags that filled all the space between the sofa and armchairs. She brought from Lapland Cave much more than she took there. Her parents gave her all that they thought could be needed for a newlywed bride. She didn't argue with them, knowing her mother knew better on how to keep the house.

'It's alright with me.' Marcus agreed and took the basket from her hand. 'I'll carry it for you.' She followed him.

After their quick lunch was over, Marcus left the house immediately. She saw him to the door, wondering silently why he was on a rush.

'I'll be back as soon as I can. Trust me.' He said looking into her eyes where she read the real answer. He was going fast to see someone who had to know about the findings in Lapland Cave.

'I'll be waiting for you.' She said simply. He kissed her on the cheek and left.

Demetra closed the door behind him and her heart squeezed painfully as in premonition of something bad.

* * *

Marcus's first stop was at Odin's house that he knew was at home as any other Sunday. He was not mistaken. The door opened for him before he rang the doorbell. It was Odin himself. They hugged.

'I'm so glad to see you. Happy New Year! Where did you disappear? You said you'd be back soon when we met last time.' Odin bombarded him with questions.

'Happy New Year to you too. I didn't mean to disappear. Demetra and I went to her parents to ask their permission for marriage and as soon as it was given, we got married there. We didn't need any special permission. Both of us are Stakhanò.' Marcus said, but noting the changing of expression on his friend's face, he exclaimed: 'Odin, sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. You know well the stupid laws and regulations of this country. If she'd be Barbò, I needed a special authorization. I don't need to tell you all of it.' Marcus began to apologise.

'I didn't get offended at all. I just remembered something. I'm glad to see you. Come here.' Odin said and let Marcus in. He then closed the door.

'Come, take a seat. What do you want to drink? Some liquor?'

'I could have a cup of coffee. I didn't have any.' Marcus said.

'Martina's out. I'll prepare it for you.' Odin said.

'Don't bother. I'll do it myself.' Marcus volunteered.

'Excellent.' Odin agreed. They went to the kitchen. It was in a terrible disorder.

'Now is my turn to apologise. We've had a terrible time over the last two weeks. Martina's mother passed away.'

'I'm sorry to hear it. Please accept my condolences.'

'And this is not the only sad thing which happened to us.' Odin added and continued in the sign language: 'Eric is in prison. He's accused of the murder of Gian Longis. At the news of the mother's death, he got fully crazy. I'm concerned about him. He's a desperate man. They'll make him talk. Eric is in our group.' Marcus met the hard glance of Odin. They understood each other. That was real trouble. Both of men knew it.

'Coffee?' Odin asked in a loud voice. Marcus didn't reply being busy looking for the *Moka* coffee machine, which he knew, was somewhere there. On the second shelf, above sink cabinet he found it. Then he went to search for coffee.

'I cannot find the coffee. Where is it?' He was calmed enough to ask loudly.

'Wait, I'll give it to you.' Odin replied, at once picking up the needed and giving it to him. Marcus portioned the coffee and then put it on the electric stove. At the sound of bubbling liquid, he switched off the appliance and lifting the pot poured some coffee into one of the tiny cups.

'I want some cognac with it.'

'It's the best treatment against cold.' Odin agreed getting the bottle. Marcus took it from his hand and poured a good portion of the golden liquor into his cup, filling it to the trim.

'It looks like you prefer cognac with coffee instead of coffee with cognac.' Odin joked at his friend.

'Hm.' Marcus made uncommitted answer and drank the hot liquid at once. 'It's so good.' Then he pulled his friend by the sleeve, which at once turned to face him and began quickly in the sign language to tell him about his trip to Lapland Cave, the wedding and their findings inside the cave. As Marcus continued his story, he could see Odin's face changing from curiosity to surprise, then to astonishment and at last to anger and fury. His eyes were full of hate, cold and final.

'I'll kill all of them. The scum of the earth!' Odin signed to Marcus.

'Take it easy otherwise we'll be the ones who'll get shot. Take your time to think over what can be done to destroy this snake's country. I don't have any ideas yet. I'm going to think about my findings and to see if I'll get some ideas about our next step in fighting the State.' Marcus attempted to cool him off.

'I'll try.' Odin signed again.

'I must go now. I have some things to do. I don't want to be late for dinner. Demetra is waiting for me.'

'How do you like the married life? Isn't it quite different from bachelors?' Odin winked at his friend.

'I don't know yet. It's my fourth nuptial day. Up to now, it was tolerable.'

'Tolerable? I don't believe my own ears. The groom of three

days, urgent for his bride as I've seen you before, telling me it's tolerable. There is something wrong with you, if you speak like that.'

'I've used the wrong word. It's not tolerable. It's wonderful but I don't care for the others to know about my private life.' Marcus was introvert as usual.

'In this case, I'll let you be.' Marcus was already at the kitchen door, impatient to leave.

'See you soon. My greetings and my sympathy to Martina. I hope to see her next time. Call me when you're ready,' Marcus said putting on his coat, his scarf around the neck and put on an *ushanka*, the typical Russian winter hat. Then he shook his hand with Odin and left.

His next visit was to his brother. Alexis opened the door and seeing Marcus grabbed his hand with both of his and pulled him into the room. Then he hugged him hard as not believing his own eyes.

'I've worried so much about you, it must be crazy of me, but I thought about it continuously. When you called me from that northern place, I forgot its name, and told me you're going to stay there for some days and even to get married; I couldn't believe my own ears. Well, I knew you'd be married soon, but there is a big difference between speaking about it and actually doing it. My congratulations.' Alexis spoke quickly as being afraid his brother would disappear.

'I'm all right as you can see. We got married on the eighth. Everything went fine.' Marcus said slowly.

'Where is Demetra? Why did you come without her?' Alexis asked him in an agitated voice.

'She's at home, unpacking after the trip. Tell me more, how are you? What's new about you and Anissia?' It was Marcus's turn to ask the questions.

'We've spent the New Year's Eve dinner together at the Astoria. A lot of luxury, fancy dresses and a lot of noise. I didn't care for

that place, but Anissia seemed of being happy.' Alexis said and stopped. Marcus noted his sad face.

'And now? What's wrong again?' Marcus asked sharply.

'Nothing. I haven't seen her since that night. I've called her at home every day and night but no one picked up the phone. She didn't call me either. I don't know what to think. I guess she didn't want to continue our relationship.' Alexis murmured.

'Rubbish. She's in love with you. I didn't tell it to you before, it was not my business, but now it is.' Marcus said looking at his younger brother. Suddenly a thought came to his head. At first, he drove it away, but then he reconsidered it and at last, he burst it out: 'listen to me: I'm sure something terrible happened to her. I know Demetra very well and if her girlfriend is the same as she, she couldn't stay at home and not picking up the receiver when the phone rang. She's not at home at all. She's somewhere. But where, you should find it out immediately. Alexis, go to the Guardians and report about Anissia as a missing person.' Marcus got agitated. 'More to it, let's go together to her house and see what we can find out there,' he added. Alexis looked completely lost. His face was so desperate, that Marcus felt sorry for him.

'Put on your coat. We're going to her place.' Marcus said, moving to the coat closet and opening it wide. 'Which one you want?'

'This one.' Alexis reached him and pulled out one of his shearing. He put it on quickly.

'I'm ready.'

'We'll go with my car.' Marcus offered, seeing Alexis was not in condition to drive. They left the house and went to the car parked in the driveway.

Reaching Anissia's house, the first thing Marcus noticed was a high layer of snow on the driveway. It looks like no one had cleaned it for several days. He parked the car on the road.

'Let's go.' He said to Alexis who was silent from the moment they left his house.

'Alexis, move. What's wrong with you, brother? Move, fast.' Marcus pushed him slightly on the shoulder. Alexis obeyed to his command reluctantly.

At last, both of them got out and began to walk to the main door. As they were walking on the driveway, their legs sank up to the knee into the snow. Marcus was sure the girl was not at home, there was no sound coming from the house. It was a very bad sign, both of them knew it.

They ascended three steps and stopped in front of the main door. Marcus pressed on the button. They heard the shallow sound of the bell. Nothing else. They looked at each other. Marcus pushed the button several times again but the house was silent. Then he pushed on the door hard, and to their big surprise, it opened wide revealing the inside.

'Come in.' Marcus said and stepped in. Alexis followed him.

The house was cold. Marcus closed the door behind them and looked around.

'Alexis, wake up. Look around and see if something is missing. I'll look too.' Marcus said quickly.

'I'm not sleeping, stupid. I'm worrying about her to death.'

'In this case, why didn't you come here as soon as you didn't reach her on the phone? Ah, forget about it.' Marcus's disappointment with his brother was too great, but he decided to put aside their misunderstandings. 'We must start from here and go through the whole house.' Marcus's business-like voice was cold and precise. Alexis just nodded.

They went methodically from one room to the other, including her bedroom and bathroom. The last place was the soundproof closet to where they went, and, after firmly shutting its door, they sat each on one of the low stools.

'I'm sure she left the house early in the morning. All her things are in place, except the bed is undone and the pyjama is missing and her dressing gown as well. Her everyday overcoat and boots are also missing. Moreover, there is no toothbrush in its place

and… 'Alexis said and stopped noting the horrified expression on the face of his older brother.

'What is it?' He asked but the terrible thought was already lingering in the back of his mind. He didn't have the courage to say it loud. Marcus did it for him.

'She was arrested. Some items that are missing from the house are those that are allowed to take to the preliminary detention quarters. Oh my God, what did she do? Why?'

'I don't know anything.' Alexis' eyes bulged from its orbits: 'She found those articles for us. Do you think she could be arrested for it?'

'I don't think so. It looks like something else happened to her. We need to find out what.'

'I'll go to the Guardians immediately,' Alexis said.

'Yes, you are. Don't tell them you've figured out about the possibility of her arrest. Tell them your fiancée is missing and let's see what they say to you. Meantime, I'm going home. Demetra is waiting for me. After the Guardians, come to Demetra's house. We'll be waiting for you. Be calm. Don't panic,' Marcus instructed him.

'Don't worry about me. I'm a medical examiner, not just a doctor. If I can face everyday corpses and dismember them, if needed, I can face the scum of the society.' Alexis was determined.

'Excellent. We can go now. We'll be waiting for you for dinner. Be quick.' Marcus said and opened the closet's door. They left the house, switching off all the lights and leaving everything as they had found it.

Chapter 18

It was so nice to be back in the office, sit in her comfortable armchair and under the familiar sound of the machinery checking on the work in progress registered in her computer, Demetra thought, as she was enjoying her first day back in the office. But her idealistic mood was soon over, when agitated Christina rushed into the room without knocking and shouted at Demetra: 'Run at once to the machinery. They are fighting.'

'What do you mean by "fighting"?' Demetra lifted her eyebrows.

'Come quickly and you'll see it with your own eyes.' Christina was then rude. It was clear something extraordinary was going on there. Christina was not herself. Demetra, shocked by her behaviour, immediately rose from her seat and went to the door. Together they ran to the manufacturing area.

The scenery unveiling in front of her eyes, Demetra could have never believed if she had not seen it herself. There were several men exchanging blows as she only read of in history books. Of course, it was unheard in Karsland. The distorted faces, full of hate, tousled clothes and loud foul words called at each other and everything else that can be connected with brawl, all of that she saw, right in front of her. To her extreme horror, the women standing nearby continued to encourage the fighters with loud screams.

'We must do something to separate them.' Demetra cried in desperation.

'Bill, John. Do something.' Demetra commanded to the operators standing near her.

'Not me.' Bill refused categorically.

'Me neither.' John did the same.

'Let them fight until they're tired. Then they'll stop by them-

selves. I've read in one book about wrists fights.' One of the women suggested.

At hearing such advice, Demetra immediately turned around and ran to Odin's office. For sure, he would have been able to stop those animals, as she thought of the men.

'Hi, Brenda. Is Mr Bachter in?' Demetra rushed into her boss's office.

'Yes, Miss Breloff. You know it very well, he's always in. Sometimes I'm wishing that he would take some days off to give me some freedom. Otherwise, I'm the only secretary whose boss is always in, am I not?' Brenda puffed her lips, mockingly raising her eyes to the ceiling and nodding her head. 'Go ahead, 'she added. Demetra knocked and entered at once without waiting for his permission.

'What happened now? You don't look like yourself,' Odin said. At the sight of Demetra he rose at once and neared to her.

'There, on the floor, is…' She stopped not knowing how to call what she saw. Then she took her courage and stated: 'there is a fight. Several men are fighting with their wrists. I don't know what to do. I asked some others to separate them, but no one wanted to get involved.'

'Fight?' Odin asked, but without waiting any more explanations from her, he ran out of the office. Demetra ran after him, but he was much quicker and she caught with him on the floor only.

'Wow, what do we have here?' he roared and went in the midst of the fighters beating them with all his strength. Demetra stood in astonishment watching his vigorous work. At first, the fight was going on but soon after Odin's interference, the fighters began to lose their coordination and one by one stopped the brawl. When the last one put down his hands and no one spoke a word, everyone just looked at each other in silent amusement. They were a variegated crowd of red-faced, agitated, dishevelled people, who hardly could recognise each other. It was a terrible view for Demetra.

'Everyone return to their places. I don't want to know who started it, who's right and who's wrong. All of you are guilty of unacceptable behaviour during your working hours. It's shame on all of you. You're Stakhanò and should be above these scuffles.' Odin said curtly. No one replied. They stood silently as waiting for something.

'I said, return to your places.' Odin repeated irritated.

'We don't want to work anymore.' He heard a puffing voice coming from behind. Odin turned to see the red-faced operator, one of those who were fighting.

'Explain yourself. What do you mean? You're Stakhanò, aren't you? Every Stakhanò must work. The work is a privilege in this country.' Odin said looking at him.

'I've learned about it in the school, Engels wrote that work made the human from the monkey, wasn't it? In that case, why Barbò are not working? Are they monkeys?' the man said, glancing around to see if his words got some reaction from his companions. Then he continued: 'It has nothing to do with monkeys. Barbò has no brains. They cannot produce anything. This is why the State decided to make monkeys out of them. As for us, we're donkeys, working for everyone.'

'I don't believe you're serious. Let's leave this subject at once. You're stepping on a dangerous ground. You can be accused of treason and put into prison. I know you don't mean what you say. Listen to me, return to your place and continue to work. If you want to speak with me, come to my office and I'll hear your complains.' Odin tried to persuade the man.

'I want to speak in front of everybody. I have nothing to do in your office.' The man insisted. Odin didn't know what to do then.

'Nick, don't get carried away. Listen to your boss,' Brenda intercepted suddenly. To everybody's surprise, the big man turned at once and walked away immediately. Everybody looked at each other in amusement, trying to figure out why. Brenda stood

blushing profusely. Demetra thought there had to be some connection between those two.

'Come with me.' Odin ordered to Demetra and turned to the exit. Demetra obeyed silently. When they entered his office, Odin closed the door firmly and turned to face her.

'First of all, my congratulations on your matrimony. Marcus told me yesterday.' He said in a normal voice. Then he started with harsh, commanding tone: 'What's going on in your department? How many times I've told you to keep everything under control? Discipline is the most important factor in our work. Last time, when you've had a problem, I warned you that I wouldn't tolerate a next time.' His reddened face was distorted from the anger and Demetra was smart enough to keep quiet, fully understanding that it was her fault if the production assembly was then closed and a half day of work was lost.

'I'm sorry.' She said in a small voice.

'So-o-o-rry, I am sorry.' Odin mimicked her. "You're sorry you cannot recuperate the lost of the production, destroyed machinery, sabotage and take back all insults which were directed at me as a representative of the Ruling class. I want to know what is going on down there. I have a right to know." Odin insisted.

'How should I know? It's my first day after vacation. I can call Christina. She must know how the fight started.' Demetra was on the defensive. Then she added: 'That bulky man was always the most quiet, calm and agreeable. I just cannot believe he could turn such way as he did. Thanks to Brenda, he walked away and everything was calm as usual. Maybe he was tired from too much work. Recently, we've been much busier than usual.'

'Maybe we have, but it's not an excuse for fighting. When this news will reach the State Committee, I can only imagine what it will create there.' Odin said.

'Why should that happen? No one here will report about it. I won't.' Demetra said.

'You won't, but there's always someone here in who'd be happy to deliver the message to the Rulers and I'm the one who'll be blamed for it.' Odin said. Demetra didn't reply.

'I guess it will be best, if I'll report on this incident myself. At least there'll be no job for moles.' Odin said.

'May I leave now?' Demetra longed to be out from here.

'Yes, you can. Question that girl, Christina, about the happenings and do me a favour, ask her about Eric. How close did she know him?'

'She told me already. He was with her in the Statedom.'

'As a woman, did you get the impression that Eric could have been in love with her?'

'I thought Eric was in love with her, but she didn't care for him. I think she was in love with that Gian Longis.' She replied.

'It's exactly what I thought too.' Demetra confirmed his suspicions.

'If I'll get some news I'll report to you.' She sounded formally before leaving his office.

As soon as she returned to her office, she sent Brenda to fetch Christina.

The low knocking was the girl's, she thought. 'Come in,' the door opened slowly admitting timid Christina, who looked as she was stepping to the scaffold.

'Come; don't be afraid, no one is here to eat you up.' Demetra invited the girl in a quite unusual manner. However, her words gave the girl some courage and she moved faster.

'Close the door and sit on this chair.' Demetra commanded pointing at one of the seats in front of her desk. Christina obeyed.

'And now, my dear, you'll tell me everything that's happened in your area today. I won't accept any excuses from you. You're Stakhanò as I am and the rest of our co-workers. As being ones, we're impartial to anyone except ourselves. Is that clear?' She commanded harshly.

At first, Christina seemed to refuse, but then she began to speak

without any motion or expression. Little by little, Demetra got the picture of what was happening on that day and the previous week. There was a problem for a while, as she understood.

'Are you telling me Nick was involved in a similar brawl three days earlier? It was in the men's locker, wasn't it? Why didn't you report about that incident?' Demetra asked.

'I couldn't. Nick is an excellent person. He's smart and just. I couldn't report on him.' Christina replied. Demetra looked at her and remembered Brenda's reaction.

'Is Brenda his girlfriend?'

'Yes, she is. They're planning to marry, but her parents are against it. Her mother thinks about him being insecure as a husband. He's unreliable, she said.'

'What do you mean "unreliable"? 'Demetra asked.

'He talks too much and many other things unknown to us. Brenda said he's read a lot. His father inherited enormous quantity of books, old books published before the creation of Karsland, from his uncle. This is why he knows a lot. Brenda likes him very much, but her parents don't.' Christina continued.

'And today? Who started the brawl?'

'It was not Nick, for sure. Jim said to Nick that he was late today, again. Nick replied he should mind his own business. Jim called him uncouth and suggested to get a Barbò girl to learn manners. Nick got angry and began to shout at him, calling him an eternal slave. Jim didn't understand what it was the meaning of it and hit Nick. Nick punched him on the face and they were fighting in serious when others jointed them. Some on Nick's side, some on Jim's. That's all. I know nothing more.' Christina concluded, looking into Demetra's face. Demetra had no more questions. It was clear they fought to solve their misunderstanding. It was the first time in her life she witnessed men fighting, as they're told at school, which was a common occurrence in old Europe. In what direction were they moving? She thought, for sure not to the higher standards of comocratia.

'You can go now.'

'Miss Breloff, may I congratulate you on your marriage?' Christina asked timidly.

'Of course, you can. Thanks.' Demetra said and blushed against her will.

'We heard about your wedding but we're not sure, since you didn't say anything but when I saw your wedding ring, I knew you're married already. I'm so happy for you. Your husband is Mr Vanderson, Marcus Vanderson, isn't it? He's so handsome and smart.' Christina smiled at her.

'We'll speak about my wedding some other time. Go now and start working. Time is passing very quickly.' Demetra decided to change the subject. She thought Christina was becoming impertinent.

'Have a nice day, Mrs Vanderson.' Christina greeted her and left.

Mrs Vanderson. The name sounded alien to her. She was not sure she wanted to have that strange foreign name, although she wanted the man. She had to decide whether to keep her maiden name at work or change it at once, she thought. I'll speak about it with Marcus, she decided. Then she remembered about her boss who was waiting for her report.

* * *

On the same day, Marcus went to his office as well. He was not sure on how to behave with his colleagues too but he didn't worry. He hoped to get the right answers to all questions, which he knew were coming.

'Mr Vanderson, congratulations on your marriage. It was quite a surprise for us to hear you married so quickly after your return from abroad.' He heard those or similar exclamations addressed to him, but he didn't pay any attention to them. He just smiled and thanked everybody and quickly went to his office. He took off his overcoat and his famous hat, when someone knocked on the door.

'Come in.' He called. The door slowly opened and revealed Vera, his secretary.

'Mr Vanderson, welcome back. Please accept my congratulations on your marriage.' She murmured with a solemn face.

'Thanks. Why so gloomy? You should feel happy for me. Marriage is an institutional matter and I performed my duty for the country and the State Committee.' Marcus stated formally. I must be getting crazy to speak all that rubbish, he thought.

'Something new?' He asked to change the subject.

'No. Mr Young was using your office during your absence. He used your computer. Sometimes there was another man with him. He was a computer specialist. I guessed there were some problems with it.' Vera reported in a calm low voice.

'When have they been here? Two, three days ago?' He asked.

'No, they've started working here as soon as you left. Mr Young didn't return to his office after the vacation yet.' Vera replied.

'Well, in this case, I'll be the first to start on our new working year. Please bring me all my mail and a cup of coffee, espresso, please.'

'In just a moment.' Vera said and left at once. Marcus went to his desk and took the seat. He turned to the window and looked at the grey sky. He felt the same gloom inside him. It looked like Robert was looking for something in his computer and he used one of his specialists. Why? I should be ready for any question asked by him. What did he search for?

The door opened again admitting Vera with a bunch of papers under her arm and the tray in her hand.

'Your coffee, Mr Vanderson. And your mail. I'll be back with more.' She said placing the tray in front of him and mail on the side.

'Thanks. You can go now.' He dismissed her. He took the tiny spoon and put some sugar into the cup. Then he slowly mixed it. He drank the hot liquid, feeling that it was warming him up and giving him some courage. He was getting himself ready to fight

for his survival. He didn't have to wait too long until the door opened wide and Robert himself was there, facing him.

'Are you in office?' His appearance took Marcus by surprise.

'Where do you want me to be?' Robert was rude as usual.

'Well, I was informed you didn't show up after your vacation yet.' Marcus was on defence.

'Today is my first day back as well as yours, isn't it?' Robert replied twisting his lips. Marcus kept silent sensing he was in danger. He had to be patient and soon he'd know what he'll face.

'I've heard you're married already. You told me you needed time to think about the arrangements for your wedding. You didn't mention about going to Lapland Cave. How did it happen that you were on your way to Wolf's cave and suddenly made a U-turn and went in direction of the North instead? Then all that crazy drives through the countryside? What's wrong with both of you?' Robert began his interrogation.

'Why are you so interested in my movements and me? I could never even think to follow someone. Why did you do it?' Marcus went on contra offence.

'Why not? I'm the one who's asking questions here and you're to answer. Don't try to turn tables. You know well why I'm asking you.' Robert sounded harsh and determinate.

'I'm not under investigation here. You've no right to question me. I'm not going to answer any of your stupid questions.' Marcus cut it short. At his words, Robert's face reddened and eyes filled with blood. He resembled a bull, Marcus thought, remembering he heard that from someone.

'Well, in this case, I'm arresting you for a bridge of information. I've found your subversive tricks.' Robert was shouting now.

'Do it. I want to see it. Who are you to arrest me?' Marcus shouted back at him.

To his surprise, Robert calmed down and sat on one of the chairs in front of the desk. The men looked at each other warily, but kept quiet. At last, Robert broke the silence.

'I've found out you've cancelled one of the files which had a key information to the murder case.' Robert said calmly.

'Did I? I didn't cancel anything, as far as I know.' Marcus rejected coolly.

'I reinstated the file.' Robert went to the super-computer and switched it on. Then he pressed several keys and the familiar husky voice filled the room.

'I'm telling you it's the truth. It comes from reliable sources. This thing is a tomb for us. I've stopped watching TV when I noticed they were telling me to do so. I felt there must be something in it. Today I know for sure, they've made robots out of us, worst than slaves. We're just obedient, brainless marionettes whom they pull on their spider strings. You know why they did it. To cover up their dirty tricks. I know about their schemes too.' Robert stopped the CD and turned to face Marcus. He looked so pleased with himself that Marcus wanted to hit him directly into his fat face, squashing its triumphal expression. But no muscle moved on Marcus's face. It was stony and unmoved.

'Well. What is that supposed to mean?' Marcus asked, feigning to be ignorant of the matter.

'Don't pretend you don't know this voice. It's Eric, isn't it? You know him well, since you have met him at one of our cosy teahouses. I know everything about you and many of your friends and acquaintances.' Robert said. Marcus didn't reply. He decided to stay silent in case that idiot was registering their conversation and later on would manipulate it in his own interests.

'You didn't answer my question.' Robert insisted. Then he said: 'Don't answer. It's not important today. When it'll be important, you'll tell everything. We have many ways to get all information, if we want.' Marcus continued to keep silent.

'I'll be in my office. Take your time; I have no rush. When you're ready, come to me and tell me everything that you know about your friends.' Robert added and rose from his chair.

'See you later on.' He added and left.

Marcus did not move. Long after Robert left, he continued to sit in his chair, looking absently, and thinking on what to do next. In front of him was a big dilemma to which he didn't have a solution.

* * *

'How was your first working day?' Smiling Demetra opened the door to Marcus still in her overcoat, since she'd arrived just minutes before him.

'I don't think it was successful, thanks to Robert's naggings. And yours?'

'It was the worst day of my entire life. There was a wrist fighting in my manufacturing area. First time in my life, I've witnessed the violent nature of the human being, about which I'd read so much. In Karsland we were never exposed to such displays.' Demetra said.

'And in the end? Did you report to Odin as by regulations?'

'I've called him for help. No one had the courage to separate them.'

'And Odin? Did he?'

'Oh yes. He went to their midst and beat them up. Soon, they stopped their fighting. Odin and I went to his office. He lectured me about not being able to maintain the discipline in my area. Tell me, who can control a furious man? Today I've learned something: there are no ways to make a man change his ways.' Demetra stated.

'You forgot about S.' Marcus reminded her, lifting his eyebrows.

'I didn't.' Demetra continued in the sign language. '*Stimulazer* was and is the only way to calm anybody down. This is what I've learned today.'

'You think so, but I don't.' Marcus said.

'Did you hear from Odin? When shall everybody know about the caves?' Demetra asked.

'I thought of going to see him today, but Robert's words warned me about some sinister waiting for us. I've decided to postpone my visit for a while.'

'Who knows, it may be too late.' Demetra concluded. Strangely enough, Marcus didn't oppose.

Then, all of the sudden he signed to her: 'I've changed my mind. I'm going to Odin now. Don't wait for me. Eat alone. I'll be back as soon I can.' He kissed her on her cheek and opening the door disappeared in the dark.

Demetra closed it after him and absently stood there, wondering what made him to runaway. In her mind, she went again through their conversation, but she could not figure out what had triggered such reaction.

Chapter 19

Marcus arrived at Odin's right in the middle of their dinner.

'Come, join us.' Martina offered and Marcus agreed. Odin, with his mouth full of soup, was vigorously gesticulating to him to sit on his right. Marcus didn't wait for a second invitation. Martina placed a plate full of hot soup in front of him. It's delicious aroma made Marcus feel guilty about poor Demetra, left to dine alone. Although, her words made him to come to Odin. She said: '*Stimulazer* was and is the only way to calm everybody down.'

'Any news?' Odin asked. They spoke in the sign language.

'I thought you'd have some.' Marcus replied.

'It's too early for something big to happen, but I've already instructed some of my men to look on the lost antique artefacts.'

'The funniest thing of all is that many paintings that were on their files are the same as I've seen in museums. What do you think it could mean?' Marcus said.

'Those in museums are fakes, but the ones in the caves are real. It's simple as that.' Odin said.

'It means someone is paying the State Committee for keeping those treasures. Moreover, not only this, Karsland was created to preserve and guard the artefacts.' Marcus said. Then he added: 'The only thing I cannot figure out is why OFF LIMITS zone was created now, not seventy five years ago.'

'I can answer this question. For many years, our Rulers were secure. Recently, something disturbed them and it was necessary to reinstall security guards to protect the treasure. It looks like our wealth depends on someone's pay. We're the keepers of the wealth of others, maybe the gossip about that Pope was true.' Odin said.

'Which gossip?' Marcus was curious.

'Your soup is getting cold.' Martina intercepted.

'Thanks.' Marcus said and took a spoon.

'I want to show you something you haven't seen yet.' Odin signed continuing their subject. Marcus nodded.

As soon as the dinner was over, silently they left the dining room and went to one of the wall closets in the corridor. Odin opened its door but instead of stepping in, he pressed one of the planks on the floor to his left. Without any sound, the planks began to move revealing an opening in the floor. It was approximately one square metre, Marcus thought. Odin kneeled and putting his right hand into the hole, he searched for something. The next moment, the light came on, illuminating a ladder leading into the deep basement. Odin began descending, Marcus followed.

Once they had reached the bottom, Marcus saw a big room, painted in white. All walls were covered with some maps and photos of various guards' posts, as Marcus thought.

'You can speak normally here. I did the soundproofing personally, as well as the rest of it. It took months of work... We've worked together with Martina. No one knows about it but you. I kept it secret from everybody.' Odin said proudly.

'You did an excellent job.' Marcus said.

'I've thought about those caves. I think we should inform someone abroad about our findings.' Odin said.

'I agree with you. But how can we contact them avoiding to be tapped on by the Guardians?' Marcus asked.

'That's a problem. I have no means.' Odin looked into Marcus's eyes.

'All right, I'll do it for you. I've brought with me a mobile telephone, which is prohibited here. I can use it, but remember it can only work once. It will be intercepted in a few seconds and in less than two minutes, the Guardians will be knocking at my or at your door, depending from where we called.' Marcus said.

'We'll keep your phone as a last resort. No one can grab the seriousness of the situation with a short call. It must be more than

that. I have everything to connect my computer to the Internet, but I don't think it's a good solution either. Do you have Internet in your office?' Odin looked at Marcus.

'Yes, I do. However, I cannot use that ultra-modern computer. Robert uses it too. By the way, he caught me deleting the file with Eric's voice. Robert, son of a b., sorry for my language, he brought a specialist in and reinstated it. Then he played the file to me and asked for my opinion. I didn't know what to do. I said I've never held that CD in my hands but he didn't believe me.' Marcus said.

'How about your secretary? Don't you have your own PC for your private correspondence?' Odin said.

'No, they didn't provide me with any. I've a secretary but her working desk is together with several others. There is no way to get to the Internet.'

'In this case, I'm going to use my lap computer with your mobile phone. I'll go to my mother-in-law apartment. She died but my father-in-law is still living there. In hi-rise building it will be difficult to identify the source of the signal speedily. It will take, as I've calculated, at least ten minutes and it'll be enough for me to send all information I want.' Odin said.

'It's better this way.' Marcus agreed.

'You must give me an email address of at least two people. We must be sure our news will reach them.' Odin said.

'I can give you all my addresses. There are at least forty. Don't forget I've spent seven years there.'

'Give me a few, but reliable ones.'

'I'll prepare it and give it to Demetra. Tomorrow you'll have it.' Marcus promised and then offered: 'Do you want me to write that information?'

'No. It's my job. You did more than enough. From now on, I don't want you to get involved. It's too dangerous. The country gets into turmoil little by little. Soon, there will be strikes everywhere. I have information that many Barbò stopped watching TV and, as you know, it means soon there will be old-fashioned

crime and robberies. Everything just as you saw in old Europe. There are no *Stimulazer* and the population is on its own. Here we are in prison and when it'll over, everything will be back as it is in old Europe. I cannot wait for that moment.' Odin said.

'I cannot say I like all that junk and the scum of the society there, but one thing is for sure: there is still some freedom left, although I don't think it will last for long.' Marcus said.

'Come, I'll show you some of our material.' Odin was shifting some papers on the long rectangular table placed in the middle of the room. A lighting fixture hung from the ceiling, illuminating around.

Marcus neared and looked over Odin's shoulder. There were piles of files. Odin opened several of them. Marcus saw cut-offs from old newspapers, copies of some letters and photos, old and new. It was a collection of all information about Karsland, its creation and prosperity. Then, his eye caught a long article about Barbò, the history of creation of that class, their customs, traditions and the recent death of Gian Longis. Marcus was sorry for Barbò, but he could never have married one of those idle people who were always immaculate dressed, polite-spoken and well mannered but without any intellect. He found them too boring to get involved with.

'I was brought up in the Statedom.' Odin began. 'I've never knew my parents. I was told they had died in a car accident. If so, they had to be Stakhanò. Mr Issel was and is my benefactor. He followed my education and thanks to him, I have my position. Nevertheless, inside me I was never secure. I had a nagging feeling as someone was watching me and registering each of my movements. Unless it was my imagination. When I fell in love with Martina and we decided to marry, if only you could have seen how strongly Mr Issel was opposing to it. For the first time in my life, I saw him insolent and offensive. He seemed to take it as his personal crusade; he would not let me marry her. I insisted and married anyway.' Odin stopped. He was agitated now.

'I'm not following you. What your marriage has to do with the Underground Movement? Are you avenging his opposition to your marriage? Is Albert Issel your personal enemy?' Marcus was astonished.

'It has nothing to do with Mr Issel or anyone who is at the State Committee at present. It's clear; there's something wrong in this rotten country. It's a fake country. Made of lies and tricks. Don't you see Karsland is situated between two other countries? Excuse me, how it's possible that any country would give a piece of their land for the creation of the other? There must be something wrong about it.' Marcus could hardly understand his friend, who was speaking too quickly and unclearly. He seemed of being disturbed too. 'I swore to myself, I'll destroy the devil that's in here. And I'll do it, whatever it'll take or cost me.' Odin concluded excitingly.

'I'm sorry for you. You shouldn't forget there are half million people who have lived in luxury and contentment for many years. There will be some who'll be against you, not to mention the State Committee. Your story overwhelmed me. I cannot find the right words to express my astonishment.' Marcus said.

'You don't need to say anything. It's an evil country and must be destroyed. Are you with me or not?' Odin asked directly.

'I'm with you. You know it well. There is no way for me to leave you alone. In any case, it's too late.' Marcus said.

'Thanks. I trust you. Let's return to our business. As we've agreed before, tomorrow Demetra will bring me some email addresses prepared by you. From that moment you'll do nothing, just wait until I'll contact you. Agreed?' Odin said.

'Agreed.'

'I've meant to ask you one more favour. We, I mean the Underground Movement, are planning to get out into the open. I thought about appearing on TV and revealing the existence of *Stimulazer*. I' don't have anybody who could be working near a TV station. I know you're in the State Building. Do you think you could trust someone to get some of my people into the TV sta-

tion? How about your friend Thomas Askold? Is his department near it?' Odin asked.

'Yes, it is. TV station is located on the eighteenth floor of the building. Thomas works on the twelfth. I'm on the twentieth. I cannot speak to him at work. I'll go to him at home, he's my neighbour now. I'll see what can be done about it.' Marcus said.

'I'm sure our appearance on TV during lunch-hour will attract the major number of Barbò, who are watching the news in their homes, since they're required to watch TV between one o'clock and three. Do you agree?' Odin said.

'I agree with everything that can bring down this caste country.' Marcus said.

'All right. Tomorrow Demetra will bring me those emails and you'll speak with Thomas. I'll be waiting for your reply.' Odin said.

'Agreed.' Marcus confirmed again and shook the hand offered by his friend. He knew it was a pact that could not be broken, unless one of them will be dead. They returned to the sitting room, where Martina met them with the bottle of whisky.

'I prefer Napoleon to John Walker.' Marcus said.

'Of course. I forgot you came back from Italy recently. Don't they drink wine only there?' Martina enquired mockingly, but left to fetch him some Cognac. She was almost at once back.

'Italians always drink wine, but I don't. I drink Cognac because the best things that happened in my life are connected with that liquor.'

'I'm happy for you.' Martina said giving him the tot.

'Thanks. To our success!' Marcus lifted his glass. Then noting the terrified expression on the host face, he quickly added: 'To our health and prosperity!'

'To our health!' Martina and Odin repeated after him.

Marcus glanced at the wall clock which shown ten to ten. He could not believe to his own eyes. Time passed too quickly. 'It's getting late. I must go unless I want to be stopped by the Guardians patrol. I don't. Demetra is waiting for me.'

'Greetings from us.' Odin said.

'Wait a minute.' Martina ran from the room. Almost at once, she returned with a small parcel in her hand.

'It's for her. It's our wedding present for both of you. I hoped to see her, but it's all right. Our best wishes for your matrimony.' Martina said giving him the parcel.

'Thank you very much. It was so nice of you. It's so old-fashioned, I'd say. But I like everything that's old-fashioned.' Marcus replied. Then he put on his overcoat and left at once.

* * *

After locking the door after him, Demetra laid on the sofa. Her mood was gloomy. She was so upset about his abrupt departure that she completely forgot about the food left on the table and in the baskets, around the sitting room. She did not care about such a frivolous things when, she thought, her entire life was falling into pieces.

The honeymoon was over, she thought. From that moment, she had to face the vicissitudes of the married life, and she was not sure she was ready for that. The way he had deserted her dinner was unheard in Karsland, but what could she do about it? She looked into the ceiling and vividly remembered one of her conversation with her mother.

It was one of the evenings after they were back from their exploration of the caves.

The two of them were in the kitchen. Elena brought a bottle of champagne from the refrigerator, offering to toast to the New Year once more.

'A lot of luck to you!' She raised her goblet filled to the trim and drank it in one gulp. Demetra followed her example, but the bubbling liquid that was so easy to consume, that time was hard to swallow. She managed to drink just a small quantity, before busting into tears.

'Not now, my baby.' Elena put down her goblet and went quickly to her daughter. She hugged her, as trying to protect her from the unknown danger. 'Courage, everything will be alright.'

Demetra didn't hear her mother's comforting words. All her thoughts were on something else. Lucky Elena, who knew nothing and was, told that their little trip had been just a fun excursion. Demetra was amazed that her mother would believe such a story.

'You should get used to men's habits. To be happily married, you should learn to close your eyes on some things done by men and don't ask many questions. They, I mean, men don't like to be disturbed, or told what to do, or criticised for anything done by them. If you're smart, you'll pretend that everything your husband does is good and just. This attitude will bring you a lot of happiness in your life.' Elena was trying to teach her daughter the basics of married life.

'I'm different, mother. I don't want to succumb to the man. I want to be his equal and companion.' Demetra retorted.

'I was like you when I married your father. His job was a string of continuous business trips, which I hated. I tried to fight against them, proposing him to ask to stay at the office, instead of going on field trips. Do you think he listened to me? Oh, no, my dear, he left on the fourth day after our marriage and came back after six months. I've spent all that time alone in our new house, arranging it and hiding from the curious glances of our neighbours. I don't want you to think that your father was a bad, cruel man. He was and is a good man, but his job came always first in his life, and then you and I came after that. I used to cry a lot in the first few years of our marriage, and then I learned to go on with my own life. I had my hands full with my work, beside of taking care of you.' Elena said. Demetra didn't reply but her tears stopped. She raised her head and kissed her mother on her cheek.

'I want to drink to us.' Demetra pulled away from her mother's arms and went to the table. She decided it was not worthy for her to argue. Elena could not understand her anyway. The problem of fathers and sons described by Turgenev was still applicable to the comocratia.

'I'll pour it for you.' The mother volunteered, following her

quickly. Then they sat at the table. The radio was on. As Stakhanò, they were not allowed to have a TV. In fact, they never saw New Year's celebrations with its colourful fireworks. The State didn't approve such spectacles for them. In the past, Demetra was disappointed with such arrangements, but at present she felt of being lucky for not seeing them. Stimulazer had changed her life and attitudes already.

On the radio, someone passionately played Mozart concert in E, K482 for piano. It was one of her favourite pieces, but that day it made her feel sad. First time in her life, she found it ridiculous to listen to Mozart at that time of the year.

'Mamma, switch off this radio. I don't feel like listening to it.' Demetra asked Elena in an irritated voice.

'Something wrong, my dear?'

'What do you think?'

'You should learn to restrain yourself, otherwise if one day you'll be under severe stress, you won't able to overcome it.' Elena retorted firmly and stood up. In two strides, she reached the radio and turned its knob roughly, astonishing Demetra with her reaction.

'I'll try to do as you say.' Demetra agreed, lifting the bottle and pouring the liquid into their goblets.

'To our health!' Elena took her glass and in one gulp drank the liquor. Demetra followed her mother's example.

'I'm ready for bed.' She said after putting down her glass.

'Don't forget to wish our men "Good Night". As my professor used to tell us, the real secret to longevity lays not in medicine or in genes but in everyday's habits. Biological clock is our longevity. We must always stick to it. To schedule our life is our ticket to longevity.' Elena said.

The sound of the doorbell brought Demetra back to reality. She stood up and went to open the door. She knew it had to be Marcus. No one could come so late. She was right: the smiling, happy face of her newlywed husband was in front of her.

I must follow my mother's advices; she decided and smiled back at him.

'You're making me feel guilty. I thought you'd be angry with me, but I see you're welcoming me.' He stepped in and took her in his arms. 'Please, forgive me for leaving you alone. I'll tell you everything. I love you.' He whispered into her ear. She was glad she had followed her mother's advice.

'I have been waiting for you.' She whispered to him.

'I've left some room in my stomach for your famous tea. How about that?'

'Let me prepare it. Meantime, you'll take off your coat.' She agreed.

In a few minutes they were sat cosy on the sofa. In front of them was a tray with the teakettle, cups and some small cakes. Demetra was sipping the hot liquid and looking at her husband, who had a look of guilt all over his face. They spoke in the sign language.

Marcus told her about the secret basement in Odin's house and why he ran so quickly to him. Demetra already forgave him about everything, but she began to have some doubts of her own.

'I began to think we have nothing to do with all that Barbò business. Why must I care for them? You've told me in old Europe there is a lot of crime and delinquency. Here, we have nothing of the sort. Maybe, by changing the laws and regulations, alas, the State Committee, our country will become the same as there, unmanageable. I don't care for being abused on the streets. Don't you see there was already a homicide case when that nice Barbò man was murdered. I figured out it was Eric, isn't it? Otherwise, why did you need to come to my office and question Christina?' Demetra said.

'Your guess was correct; Eric killed Gian Longis out of jealousy. Eric is Barbò, but his intellect is above average among Barbò levels. I guess he did well on written IQ tests, but failed hopelessly on verbal. It's known for a long time that low verbal IQ is an indicator of possible malfunctioning of areas of the brain that me-

diates behaviour. *Stimulazer* is correcting this kind of damage as well as some others. A few months ago, Eric stopped watching TV, figuring out there was something behind it. The result was he wasn't able to control his emotions and committed the crime. I agree with you, it's terrible, but don't you think it's more terrible to control the brains of the people? You said you don't care, but what if it was you who were obliged to watch TV? What would you say in that case?' Marcus gesticulated rapidly showing his emotional involvement.

Demetra didn't reply; then she signed to him she had to think it over.

'It's almost midnight. Don't you think it's time for bed?' Marcus pulled her gently to him. She put her cup down and rested her head on his shoulder. *'Whatever the problems of the World, I don't care for anything as long as I feel him next to me,'* Demetra thought, closing her eyes and turning her face to him for a kiss.

Chapter 20

The loud sound of the doorbell awoke Demetra. She moved, slightly touching Marcus who was next to her. He put his arm across her body without saying a word.

'Who could it be at this hour?' She broke the silence.

'Who knows.'

'What time is it now?'

'I guess after six. Before six there are patrols on the streets and whoever is outside there, I don't think he wanted to face the Guardians.'

The bell rang again.

'Goddamn it. Let me see who's there.' Marcus volunteered, shifting the blanket to her side. He sat on the bed. Demetra heard him reaching for his house jacket and putting his feet into the sleepers. She was still too lazy to open her eyes. She heard the sound of his sleepers on the corridor and after a while the sound of the unlocking door.

'We must do something about it.' She heard the loud agitated voice of Alexis. It was full of desperation, making Demetra to leave her bed at once. She reached for her dressing gown, put it on, and put her sleepers on and buttoning on her way she ran along the corridor to the sitting room, from where the voices were coming.

At her entrance, she found both brothers were sitting across each other and speaking in the sign language. Singular syllabuses sounded loud sometimes. She caught the word Anissia and knew at once, why Alexis was so agitated. She entered their conversation, sitting next to Alexis and pulling him by the sleeve. As he turned to her, she began in the sign language:

'Tell me, what's happened with her?'

'After two days spent in the Guardians Department, at last I was told she was arrested on the ground of treason.'

'Treason?' Demetra and Marcus sounded in unison.

'I was told she's in the special unit and no one can see her. I said I'm her fiancé, as you suggested.' He nodded at Marcus.

'And what?'

'Nothing. Fiancé is not regarded as a relative. I don't know if she has any relatives. I've never had the chance to ask her about them.'

'Her parents died in a car accident when she was young. She was an only child. We grew up together. I'll go to the Guardians and demand to visit her. By law, I'm her relative, since I knew her for over thirty years.' Demetra said.

'Thirty? How old were you when you first met?' Marcus was taken aback.

'Three. We were just two little girls, too young to understand anything but from that moment we've never separated. I'm going there now.' Demetra stated.

'And your work? Maybe you'll go to work first and then to the Guardians?' Marcus suggested.

'No. I must be with her.' Demetra stated.

'Wait a minute.' Alexis said. 'Do you remember she was with Robert Young at that party? I guess it's better if Marcus will ask Robert about her. Do you think Robert being in charge of the security, didn't know about her arrest?'

'He's a fox and a wolf. He knows everything that's going on in this country. I could bet my head it was his job putting her behind bars. Who knows what's in that little head of his.' Marcus said.

'In this case, I agree with Alexis. Go and find out why she was arrested.' Demetra agreed.

'I'll do that, but not before I've prepared myself for the day and have had my breakfast.' Marcus said smiling to his wife. Demetra laughed finding it funny to imagine Marcus in his house jacket going on to the street.

'You may laugh as you want, but the point is Anissia is in prison and for sure drugged to keep her quiet.' Alexis said gloomy.

'I'll do all what I can to find out why is she there.' Marcus said and left the room. He decided there was no reason to lose precious time with futile talk. It looked like the time of a real struggle had arrived.

'I'll be back shortly.' Demetra said to Alexis and followed her husband.

They had breakfast in full silence, since they could not use the sign language during the meal. The three of them preferred to finish it quickly and go out, each on their own way.

'I'll be in my office, if you need me.' She said to Marcus.

'Alexis and I are going together to that place.' He said to her and added: 'If your presence is required as a relative, I'll come to pick you up.'

'I'll be waiting for your call. I'm sure I'll be allowed to see her.' Demetra said and went to the main door. She was shocked after finding out about Anissia being held in prison. She could not accept such occurrence, hoping her girlfriend had run away to somewhere. She knew there was no way for Anissia to do such a stupid thing. Why did she have to runaway? It was all absurd. There was a mistake of identity, she decided. It will be soon cleared off and Anissia will be back to them.

Demetra spent all day waiting for a phone call from Marcus, but it never came.

She was so upset, she forgot to give Odin the note from Marcus and only when Odin came to her office and looked at her questionably, she remembered about it. Quickly getting out a piece of paper from her pocket dress, she held it over to him with the following words: 'It's the recipe for vegetable soup, as I've promised Martina.'

'Thanks.' He said taking it and left at once. Demetra was so occupied with her own thoughts; she ignored the propriety of his visit to her. However, on CCTV it was registered as a short visit of the boss to his subordinate, which was acceptable.

At last, shortly after four o'clock, the door opened wide to admit Marcus. His agitated face told Demetra that she had to be ready for bad news. She was not wrong.

'We couldn't find anything about her. We've spent all day as two beggars, passing hours going from one queue to the other, and in the end have been told to go to the same clerk with whom we spoke in the morning. I haven't been in the office. It's all so annoying. It looks like someone very powerful is behind her arrest. But who? I have some ideas, but didn't have time to investigate.' Marcus said.

'Why, in this case, didn't you go home directly? My day is almost over. We could meet there.'

'I went to the house but now I wanted to see…' Marcus didn't complete his sentence but Demetra knew he wanted to see Odin. She thought how strange it was that he asked her to give him the note and then came himself. It was a strange thing to do, but she didn't say anything, CCTV and listening devices were at work. She could not use the sign language either.

'I'll fetch him. Take a seat.' Demetra said and went to look for Odin. She was lucky to catch the glimpse of him at the entrance of manufacturing area.

'Mr Bachter, wait a moment. I've something to show you.' She shouted, afraid he could disappear behind the door. To her luck, he heard her and stopped.

'Please, come right now to my office, I've something to show you.' She repeated with difficulty, gasping for air after her run.

'Let's go.' He agreed without questioning her motives. She was greatly surprised, but she thought he knew it was something connected to her husband. They entered her office.

'Good day.' Odin smiled seeing Marcus waiting for him.

'Good day.' Marcus rose from his seat and moved towards them. Demetra stood between them and the CCTV, knowing her husband wanted to say something to her boss. She was not wrong. As soon as she took her position, Marcus began to speak in the sign language.

'Just before coming here, I've had the chance to talk to Thomas. He said he'd find out if there were ways to get into the TV station. He doesn't think you'll be able to be there for more than one minute before the Guardians catch you. He said he'd look into that matter and he'd tell me what could be done. He'll draw a map of ground floor with all the entrances and exits.' Marcus gesticulated.

'It looks like we're in the real business now, aren't we?' Odin's face was booming from happiness. Demetra could hardly believe her own eyes. It was the first time she saw that man looking so satisfied.

'What are you doing here?' Odin said loud suddenly. They looked at each other.

'Go home. The day is over. You've brought me here to greet your husband?' He spoke for others, Demetra caught the meaning quickly.

'Thanks. See you tomorrow. Send my greetings to Martina.' She said throwing off her white smock and moving to the closet.

'You can see how eager she's to go home.' Marcus joked, making Demetra to blush at his words.

'You're a lucky guy.' Odin laughed and left the room.

They left her office and went to the house, each in one's car, as was a custom in Karsland. There were no problems of overcrowded roads, Barbò had no transportation.

* * *

'Liz, be polite.' Mrs Issel corrected her daughter. The Issel family dined together that day, which was a rare occasion for them. They were in the family room, having coffee after an abundant Sunday brunch. Albert Issel was impatient to run away from the two women, whom he despised: Liz, who was his shame and Rebora who had failed to produce an intelligent child.

'Albert, you should tell her she must respect Diana. It's true she works for us, but she's your protégé and also she has a Degree in English language. Liz should learn from her how to speak correctly.' Rebora complained.

'If she were so smart, as you said, she'll be working in one of those research institutes which our country is full of. Why didn't she go and do research for the word "servant"? She could get a PhD and all the honours that come with it. But, she's serving us meals and you say we should thank her for each of her steps.' Liz wrinkled her nose. 'At least I'm Barbò and don't pretend to be anything at all.'

'You should be ashamed of yourself. The poor girl was left without parents and your father helped her. She's staying with us because she wants to. She's a grateful creature, not like you.' Rebora got angry now.

'I'm tired of your verbal battles. Either you curb your tongues, or I'm going to my library.' Albert said looking meaningfully at them.

'What did I say wrong? You're always hard on me. I just said to her that I'm glad she's still here.' Liz pegged.

'But you've said it with that tone. It was offensive and… I feel ashamed for you.' Albert said.

'You always feel ashamed for me. You treat anyone better than you've ever treated your own daughter.' Liz argued.

'That's enough.' Albert silenced her brusquely and rose from the sofa. At that precise moment the door was opened. Albert took his seat again, waiting for Diana to announce a visitor.

'Mr Young is here, Mr Issel.' Diana said. Robert didn't care for waiting and was already entering the room.

'Sorry for the disturbance, but I have some urgent news for you.' He looked meaningfully at Albert.

'Good afternoon, Robert. It's so nice to see you here. Take a seat. Do you care for a cup of coffee?' Rebora greeted him with a warm smile.

'Madam, thank you very much for your offer. I guess I'll take a cup of coffee, Italian please.' Robert agreed and plopped into an empty armchair in the corner of the room. Noting the annoying expression of his boss's face, he decided to sit as far as possible from him.

'Tell us something new.' Liz entered into their conversation. 'I'm dying to hear about the wedding of your friend, Marcus, to that half-bred.'

'Liz, keep quiet. You cannot speak in such way about Demetra. She's not half-bred. She's one of the few local people descending from an ancient native family who lived here for thousands and thousands of years. No one knows when her people moved here. Also, she's an engineer, Stakhanò.' Rebora corrected her.

'Stakhanò.' Liz mimicked her mother. Then she turned her head and caught the despised glance, Robert sent to her. She kept quiet, being annoyed at all of them. She decided to ruin the day fully by saying: 'I'm tired to move from one boyfriend to the other. Everyone wants to marry me, but I have no interest in the common folk, even if they're Stakhanò. Robert, you're a bachelor now. Why don't you marry me?' Liz said, innocently looking at the fat man. Robert almost choked with the coffee. He knew her very well and she was his last choice, if he'd ever decide to remarry. He pretended to cough for not answering to her.

'Liz, please go to your room. We've had enough of you today.' Albert stated angrily.

'I'll leave, but not before I'll get an answer to my request.' Liz insisted.

'Thanks for your consideration, but I'm not ready to remarry. Besides, I'm too old for you. You should look for a younger man.' Robert said, slowly choosing each word to avoid offending her.

'I've offered myself to Marcus, who's a younger man, as you said, but you've seen the result. He has chosen somebody else, although I'm the daughter of the most powerful man in the country.' Liz said, pursing her lips.

'My dear, you've said enough for today. Listen to your father and go to your room. I promise you I'll find a good husband for you tomorrow, if you're serious about settling down.' Rebora said. Liz shrugged her shoulders and rose from her seat. Silently she left the room without looking at anyone.

'Well, Robert, what brought you here?' Albert asked.

'I'd prefer to speak in private.' Robert said.

'Rebora, we'll be in my library. Are you ready?' Robert quickly stuffed the last piece of cake into his mouth and rose, shaking crumbs off from his trousers.

'What's wrong now? I'm not in the mood for your stories and jokes. Tell me quickly what do you want and go away, please. I'm not well today.' Mr Issel said in a low voice closing the door behind them.

'I wouldn't dare to come to your house, but this matter cannot wait until tomorrow. I must decide immediately on what to do.' Robert was worried.

'I'm listening.'

'Marcus, Demetra and Fedor were in the caves.' Robert blurted out.

'Our caves?' Albert asked. Robert nodded with smacking satisfaction on his face.

'Are you sure?' Albert asked again. A stream of new energy began to fill his small body. He straitened in his armchair. Resting his hands on top of his desk, and slightly bending towards, he looked impatiently at Robert.

'I'm all ears. Tell me how did you find out?' He said, studying Robert's face.

'Today someone called my office and brought this with him.' Robert began removing a CD from his breast pocket and waving it in front of his boss. 'It is one of those placed in Lapland Cave. At three thirty in the morning, on the New Year's Eve night, the three of them passed through the forest near the town, moving in its direction. They didn't have ski masks on and their faces were identifiable. Let's have a look at the footage.' Albert nodded but didn't move at all, being stunned by Robert's revelations. He could not believe to his own ears, thinking it was all sick imagination of that envious man. Ignoring his boss Robert went to the PC and switched it on.

'Did you change your password again?' He asked Mr Issel.

'No.' Robert pressed quickly some keys and then put the CD into the slot. Then he pressed Enter and Issel saw the pines and ground covered with snow and three figures, skiing fast. They were coming closer until he could see their clothes.

'You cannot say that it was them. Their faces were unidentifiable'

'Not for long. We did some work to improve that image. Look at it now.' Robert said and pressed several keys on the keyboard and again Enter. This time Mr Issel saw all three faces clearly. It was them.

'Maybe they're meeting the New Year's Eve outside.' Issel suggested.

'I would've thought that, if the three didn't have the same clothes as those who were inside the cave. Everything the same, but for the ski masks. There are no masks here but faces.' Robert triumphed.

'It's enough. You can switch it off. Leave it with me.' Mr Issel commanded.

'I'm going to arrest them on the ground of treason. Do you agree?' Robert was exhilarated.

'No. You're not going to do such thing. You're going to keep quiet about this business. I'm going to think about this matter. I'll tell you about my decision.' Mr Issel replied sharply.

'Let me understand you correctly, you don't want me to arrest these three because one of them is your beloved Marcus. Am I right?' Robert began again.

'I said very clear you are to forget about this CD and everything that can incriminate these people. I'm the one who decides in this case.' Mr Issel was firm.

'All right. I'll do as you want, but only for now. If something else will happen, I, as the Head of the Security of the State, will do as I must to protect my country from any trouble.' Robert lifted his head and looked directly into Albert's eyes: 'Just a few months

ago you were laughing at my face when I spoke to you about the Underground movement. Today you seem of being more preoccupied with it than I am.'

'You were right then.' The small man admitted reluctantly.

'That boy, Eric, told us everything about the Movement. We haven't arrested anyone yet, but we're watching everybody around the clock.' Robert sounded secure of himself.

'I hope you didn't test on him those new drugs. It'd be a pity to leave the boy stupid for the rest of his life.' Albert enquired with a slightly shaking voice. He distasted violence.

'It wouldn't be a big loss. Don't forget he's the murderer.' Robert boasted.

'Even so, in your place I wouldn't try those terrible things on him.'

'I had no other choice. He was stubborn. He didn't speak at all. He's lost his mother recently. Only after a few dosed injections he began to talk, and a few more made him speak about his brother-in-law.'

'Who's his brother-in-law?' Issel asked.

'Odin Bachter.'

'Odin Bachter? Are you sure of that?'

'Odin is married to Martina, Eric's sister.'

'I remember it now. Don't touch Odin at all. He's my protégé. I and only I can decide what to do with him or any of those three who were on that footage.' Albert commanded.

'We've intercepted several emails sent from one of the hi-rise buildings, Barbò area. I need some time to identify the exact location of sending. We have the messages as well. Let me read you one of those.' Robert said, solemnly getting out of his pocket a piece of paper. Then he opened it and read the following:

'To IL TELEGRAFO di Milano

Giorgio Testeri

Dear Giorgio, I urgently need your help. It's a matter of life and death. In Karsland are hidden all the artefacts of the World.

We have proofs. A device to dupe people was discovered. It's called Stimulazer. It was used on Barbò population. We're in real danger. Help us. The Committee of the Underground Movement.' Robert finished. He looked at Issel, who then leaned on the back of his armchair, his eyes full of horror. Robert ran to him thinking he had a stroke.

'What are you jumping for?' Issel cursed him. Robert stepped back. It looked like his boss was much stronger than he thought.

'You looked so ill.'

'Me? Ill? You must be sick yourself to think something like this can make me ill. It's all your tricks for trying to convince me to arrest these people. I don't believe to your writings. You need to provide much more than these few lines to convince me to take my word back. I know you're witty, but I'm not a fool myself.' Issel shouted now.

'Sorry, I thought to surprise you. I didn't think you'll take it such way.'

'Did you? That's all for today. Go now. I want to be left alone. I'm tired of your plays. If you want, I'll look into your tales, leave them on the table. I'll see you at the office tomorrow.' Albert leaned on the back of his armchair and closed his eyes again.

'Have a nice evening. My greetings to Mrs Issel.' Robert said, rising from his seat. Not getting any answer from the boss, he stopped for a second, and then quickly left the room.

'It's all out now.' Albert thought, feeling tired and miserable. Suddenly, he was so weak he could not move any of his limbs. He thought about his father and grandfather and all the others before them, who managed to work so hard to create Karsland. He had spent all his life to maintain the word given to his parents and to watch over that treasure, which was their daily bread. Centuries of hard work and what then. What could he do to stop those people from disintegrating his lifetime work?

'It's not the end yet. I must do something. I must do something. I must do something,' those words were hammering in his head.

He forced himself to calm down with a tot of whisky. After a while, he felt much better and very soon was ready to act.

He took the watch out of his pocket and opened it from the back. Inside was a small golden key, which he carefully took with his two fingers. Then he went to one of his tall bookcases. Stepping up on a short ladder, he reached the highest shelf. He removed several books, behind of which there was a secret hiding place. He placed the golden key into a tiny keyhole and turned it several times. Then he pulled the door gently opened, revealing a dark cavity. Albert took out a piece of paper and closed the door again. He locked it with the key, replaced the books back and returned to his desk.

For a moment, he glanced at the paper held in his hand. It was an email address, which he should use in extreme emergency only. Today was the case, he decided.

He switched on his PC and opened the Internet. Quickly, Albert recalled "Outlooker" and sent his SOS to that specific address. His message was short containing three words only: 'See today iltelegrafo.it.' It was more than enough. He knew that on the other side of the cable was the man who knew what to do.

After getting the confirmation of his message being sent, Albert cancelled it, defragged the disk in precaution of preventing the tracing his cancelled file and switched off his computer. He went again to the bookcase and repeated the procedure to put the paper back. Then he placed the golden key in its cavity on the back of his pocket watch, closed its cover and looked at the grandfather's clock. The procedure took him ten minutes; he made a note in his diary, writing the exact time only, and leaned on the back of his armchair. He felt as a heavy weight was lifted from his shoulders. He was calm then, knowing all his anxiety was transferred on somebody else's shoulders. Let them decide what to do next, Albert concluded. At the end, he, Albert, was just a treasure keeper, as many others before him. He rose and went to the door in an improved mood. Opening it briskly, he found himself facing Liz who stood very close to it.

'What are you doing here?' Albert asked sharply. He hoped she was not spying on him.

'Nothing. I just came to see you. I'm sorry, papa, for my bad behaviour. I didn't mean it. Please forgive me.' Liz pleaded copiously.

'Of course, I've forgiven you already.' Albert was taken aback by her miserable looks. 'You're my daughter, my own blood. I cannot have something against my own. It's not your fault for being Barbò. It's a joke of nature. Come here, I'll give you something.' He stepped back into the room and Liz followed him.

'Sit on that chair.' He told her and went to the bookcase between two long windows. He took something from there and brought it to her.

'It's one of the first editions of Dante, fifteenth century. He wrote it over a thousand years ago. Take it. It's my present for you, Liz.'

'It's too valuable to keep in my humble flat. I don't dare to take it out from the house. I may lose it.' Liz stated seriously. Albert lifted his eyebrows surprised at the tone of her voice, which he had never heard before.

'I was joking. Give it. Quickly. Thanks.' The usual half-stupid, half-laughing voice of Liz dispersed his suspicions. She stretched her arm and took the book from him.

'Go now. I must take care of a few things.' Albert dismissed her at once. He didn't want to stay longer than needed with that spoiled brat. He was sick just looking at her afro-style hair. She knew he hated her appearance. He told her to change the colour of her hair but no; she still had those bright red curls standing on her head. Not to speak about her clothes. All that love for bright violet, green and orange made Albert nervous just looking at them. Liz smiled at him, as apologising for her behaviour and left the room, carrying his present under her arm.

Chapter 21

Everything was ready. The day that could change the course of history of Karsland had arrived. The two of them, Odin and Marcus, left Odin's house at eleven sharp, each driving in one's car to the State Headquarters Building. None of them seemed to worry about its ending. They had made their choice and followed it precisely. The only thing that worried Marcus was Demetra. He didn't say anything to her for not making her worry about him. He knew she still had his will somewhere and she would have gotten what was his. Although he doubted that, after the events of that day, someone will ever want to keep his paintings.

They reached the building in time. Marcus parked his car near the first exit and Odin parked his near the second. It would have been helpful in case of escape. Each of them went to the separate entrances, Odin to the main and Marcus to the side one. They went to the lifts and met there as by chance. They acted as they had never seen each other before then. Their first stop was at the eleventh floor, where Thomas was impatiently waiting for them.

'At last.' The old man looked relieved at the sight of them. He was sweating profusely. 'We'll use the stairs.' He turned to the right and they walked on the long corridor. It was empty. They didn't speak, knowing each word would be recorded.

Thomas stopped in front of an emergency exit. Marcus looked at him and lifted his eyebrows in a silent question: 'Are you sure?' Thomas closed his eyelids twice: 'I am.' He unlocked it with his key and the heavy door opened slowly revealing the stairs. They stepped on the landing. Thomas led them up to the eighteenth floor, where the TV station was. The steps were steep as all emergency stairs and their pace was slowed down considerably. Odin looked twice at his wristwatch, worrying they could miss the

news. Thomas lightly tapped him on his shoulder as saying 'Don't worry, we're on time.' At last, they reached their destination and Thomas unlocked the exit door with the same key. They entered and stopped at once.

In front of them was a huge area, brightly illuminated, full of various furniture, equipment and people running around. No one paid any attention to them.

'Follow me. Be ready. You have one minute before the beginning of the news.' Thomas said quickly, moving between various equipments. Then he stopped and Marcus saw they were in front of cameramen. Three of them stood behind an anchorwoman, who was reading the news.

'Now.' Thomas said and pushed Odin forward, who stepped in front of the camera blocking the woman from the view. Thomas's job was to hold her tightly.

'Barbò, listen to me. There is an evil operating in this country. Don't watch TV, *Stimulazer* is killing you. Revolt against the State Committee, who by trick reduced you to slavery, worse than it was in the past. Get united to fight the bloodsuckers.' Odin screamed into the camera. It was a live communication to all Karsland.

At first, everyone around them was stunned by their appearance, not knowing if it was a joke. However, very soon one cameraman figured out that it was a serious matter and turned his camera away from Odin and pointed accidentally on Marcus, who in his turn, began to shout into it: 'Listen to me. Fight the bloodsuckers. *Stimulazer* is killing you. Don't watch TV.' This time the camera went off and the biggest chaos started.

'Run. Let's split.' Odin screamed to Marcus directing to the stairs. They began to run as fast as they could back to the emergency stairs, but some men had already blocked the corridor. They turned around to the lifts, which was the worse choice and even there were some others, waiting for them. They moved directly to the cameras, which were already one on top of the other.

The women's screams and loud voices of the men were heard everywhere around them, but Marcus didn't lose the hope to escape. He dived under one of the huge tables covered with a white cloth. Crawling under it with all his speed, he reached its end and stopped before getting out. There were no sounds but he cautiously lifted the cloth and looked around anyway. He had to be near some kind of office, he figured. Then he got up and entered the room made of wooden panels, which separated it from the rest of the area. It was deserted. He sat on the nearest chair to rest and to think on what to do next. In that moment, his eye caught a dresser table with a big mirror. It's a dressing room, he thought. He moved to it and the first thing he saw was a wig. Quickly, he threw off his coat and put on a white uniform jacket, which lay on the back of the chair. Then he put on a wig of short black hair, moustache and looked into the mirror. He could not recognise himself. Satisfied with his appearance, Marcus walked out and mixed with the rest. He ran with the others on the stairs until he reached the ground floor.

He looked around and slowly walked outside. Everywhere was chaos. Various people were there running from one side to the other. The Guardians armed with automatic rifles, as required on a red alarm emergency. Marcus decided to try his luck. Without delay, he went directly to his car. As soon as he was in, he started the engine. He guessed the Guardians would block the exit, but he hoped to make it. His luck deserted him when in front of his car appeared Miss Megan Brown, who recognised his car.

'It's him.' She began to scream like a crazy. 'Vanderson is here. Catch him.' She blocked his way out by standing in front of his moving car, forcing him to stop unless he wanted to run her over. Marcus had no other choice except to switch off the engine, threw off his wig, fake moustache, and get out from the car. He leaned on its closed door and waited to be arrested and taken away.

'I have him. He's here. Help. Come. Guardians.' Miss Megan continued to shout, hammering with her wrists the hood of his car. She looked as being possessed by the devil.

'There is no need to scream, Miss Megan. Relax. I'm not running away.' Marcus's calm voice seemed to cool her a little. She stopped her screams and looked at him with deep hate. He didn't care for her; she was nothing to be afraid of. He had to be ready for much worse.

'Miss Brown, where is he?' Marcus heard the insinuating voice of Robert Young.

'Here, Mr Young. He's here, on the other side.' She replied readily.

'Hi, Marcus. It was you who made so much noise up there, wasn't it?' Robert neared. Marcus kept silent.

'You can even reply. I have orders never to arrest you. You have a powerful protector, who cares for you more than for his country. You can go now but remember you must be available at any time when you'll be called to the State Committee.' Robert stated, to his great surprise.

'You must be mistaken, Mr Young. I saw him running from there. He's the one who assaulted the TV station. Arrest him first, and then investigate. He'll run away if you let him go.' Miss Megan shouted again still blocking the car.

'Miss Brown, isn't it your turn at the information desk? Please, take care of the things assigned to you. I'm the one in charge here. Clear the driveway.' Robert commanded. Miss Brown reluctantly obeyed, looking hastily at Marcus, who was already at the wheel, ready to move.

'I always knew you're a traitor. You have the look of the troublemaker. I hate old-fashioned gentlemen, who behave as they own the World.' She hissed at him and spitted on the ground. It was the worse verbal insult in Karsland. Marcus threw his head and laughed loudly, to the astonishment of all.

'Remember you must always be available to us. Now you can go.' Robert reminded him and waved to the Guardian to lift the barrier. Marcus's car crossed the post and went to the highway. Marcus was stunned by Robert who let him free; he needed time

to recover himself. As for the moment, he drove fast to put the greater distance between himself and that building.

After a few minutes driving, he regained some of his usual calm. Not wanting to terrify Demetra with his dishevelled appearance, he stopped on the side of road to assess his looks. Then he retrieved his flask and drank some liquor, which he always carried with him. He took this habit from the Old Europe, where strong liquor was used not only for drinking, but also for disinfection. Over the following few minutes, he completely recovered and turning the key and hearing the sound of the engine as usual, he began to doubt if it was he whom was just half an hour ago, at the TV station, shouting for freedom. I must be insane, Marcus thought, driving home.

He opened the door with his key not wanting to disturb Demetra. As he stepped in, to his eyes opened such an unusual scene that he froze on the threshold and wondered if he was sane for real.

'Marcus, is that you?' Demetra exclaimed at his appearance. He stood mute, just continuing to look at them.

'Hi, Marcus, I'm glad you've made it home.' Liz Issel, in person, sat on the sofa next to Demetra. Both of them looked at him as he was back from the dead.

'What are you doing here?' He found his voice at last.

'Do you mean me?' Liz asked innocently. Then she looked at Demetra and said: 'I always watch the news at twelve. Today I did as usual, but the news were unusual. You know what I mean, don't you?' Liz said.

'Liz came to us to warn me about you announcing something on the TV news, which was really a revolt. She offered me to escape and hide in her apartment. She was sure you'd be arrested.' Demetra explained.

'Why you? You have nothing to do with all that.' Marcus turned to Liz.

'Not exactly. Listen to what she has to say.' Demetra nodded to her.

'Last Sunday I had brunch with my parents. Robert Young, you know him, the fat disgusting man, arrived unexpectedly and went to close himself with my father in his library. Many years ago I discovered how to listen to what was it's said there, without staying near the door.' Liz said.

'You know ear dropping is prohibited by regulations.' Demetra reprimanded her.

'I know all the laws and regulations and I'm sick and tired of them. Well, let me continue. They spoke about some people skiing near some caves; I didn't understand this part correctly. When Robert named Eric and his confessions and mentioned your names, I got all ears. My father prohibited arresting Marcus or Odin. Robert said he'd obey to his orders, but to some level. Today when I saw you on the TV news, I thought it was quite too much and Robert might have you arrested and Demetra, as your wife. I ran here to help both of you.' Liz spoke in a calm, serious voice that was so new to Marcus. He could hardly believe that in front of him was the same Miss Issel, whom he knew almost all her life. He believed her; since she had mentioned the caves, but he still could not think she could have changed so much as she appeared to have. From the other side, she was right: Robert letting him go instead of arresting and bringing him in for an interrogation.

'Thanks, Liz. You're much better than I thought. I'm glad I was wrong. You're right, Robert let me free. But I've got orders to stay at home and be available at any moment when they send for me.' Marcus said.

'It's terrible. Why haven't you said anything to me? You could have been killed or disappeared and I could never have known what's happened to you.' Demetra reprimanded him. He went to her and put his hand on her shoulder, he didn't dare to make a display of his feelings in front of Liz. It was not the Karslander's way.

'I'm here and all right. Let's not dwell on the past. We've a future in front of us.' Marcus squeezed her shoulder lightly.

'My lunch is almost ready. Do you feel like eating?' Demetra asked, covering his hand with hers.

'I'm hungry for sure.' Liz said.

'I'm not, but as Russians saying goes, the appetite comes during the meal.' Marcus agreed too. He offered his right hand to Demetra and the left to Liz. Both women took his hands and he pulled them up to their feet. The three of them laughed wildly not knowing why. Maybe it was just discharge of energy, after the morning's stress.

They went to the dining room.

'I'll help you. I love to be Barbò because I don't like working, but cooking is my hobby.' Liz said. Marcus and Demetra exchanged their glances, that girl didn't sound as Barbò at all. She became an enigma for them.

* * *

Robert released Odin too, who got the same surprise as Marcus, with the only difference that he knew why Albert Issel let him go. Odin was sure it was Issel's order not to arrest him.

Nevertheless, Odin was back. Martina met him with a tear-stained face, since she was crying after seeing him on TV, how he was roughly handled by the Guardians and carried away. She thought she would never see him again. His return to the house was a blessing for her.

'Are you hurt? I've seen how they've handled you. It was terrible.' Martina exclaimed, seeing him. She threw herself into his arms and cried loud.

'Don't' cry. It's over. I'm back. It's a miracle, but I'm free.' He whispered into her ear and caressed her hair. She sobbed like a small child, he thought.

'I'm thirsty.' He whispered trying to get her attention to other things.

'Are you? Let me get you a glass of water.' She started pushing away from him. Then she ran from the room. Odin took off his overcoat, hung it in the closet and sat on the sofa waiting for

her. She was back with a small tray and on the top of it was a tall glass filled to the rim with bubbling mineral water, which he liked most.

'Thanks, my dear. I'm so happy to see you're alright now.' He said to her taking the glass. He brought it to his lips and drank the liquid in one gulp, he was really thirsty.

'What will be of us now?' Martina looked at him.

'I guess nothing for today. Tomorrow is another day and we'll see what it'll bring to us.' Odin said, putting the empty glass back on the tray. Then he asked: 'How about lunch?'

'Are you hungry? Could you eat after all these events?' Martina was surprised.

'Why not? It's over for now. Mr Issel himself, I guess, decided to let me free and he's the one who'll be speaking to me. Robert is a slave who's serving his master. He didn't dare to lock me in and I'm sure he will never do that. Let's see what my wife prepared for her beloved husband.' Odin joked rising from the sofa. Putting his arm on her shoulders, he led her to the kitchen to look at the choice of dishes she had prepared for him for that day.

* * *

The only person who knew nothing about the events at the State Committee Building was Alexis, who was busy in his operation room performing an autopsy on the body of a man who died during the clashes between guardians and Barbò, which happened on the last Sunday. It was no longer a sensation, the autopsy on a murdered man. Alexis could hardly believe it passed only a half-year since he had performed the first real autopsy on Gian Longis. On the previous month, through his department passed at least fifty other murder cases, together with people killed during the clashes. Alexis was too tired to get surprised at the number of dead bodies. His mind was occupied with the disappearance of Anissia, whom he had not managed to locate yet. With longing, he remembered the quiet life, which he had before all those events. He felt as being in a perpetual nightmare, be-

tween the corpses in the hospital and the desperation, out not being able to find Anissia.

'Where is Miss Brown?' Alexis asked entering the operation room and spotting the round young face of a new assistant nurse.

'I was told to replace her today.' Susan answered, blushing profusely.

'What's wrong with her?' Alexis was irritated. It seemed no one cared to inform him about changes. He didn't like to work with a young girl who was too clumsy for such work. She didn't have enough experience to assist at an autopsy and his boss knew it well. Why did he send her to him, Alexis could not figure out.

'She called, saying she had to stay all day at the State Committee. She has some things to do there.'

'Indeed, she has.' Alexis was angry now. However, he had no other solution but to begin his job. 'Prepare the instruments.' He commanded and went to the operation table, where the body was already placed. Alexis threw aside the white sheet covering it.

Another stupid, he thought, noting the knife's wounds and the dried blood on the head.

'Susan, come here, we're starting now,' he called the nurse.

'Yes, Doctor,' she neared. Alexis saw her getting pale.

'You're not going to faint, are you?' He asked, encouraging her.

'No, doctor. I'm used to these things,' she replied quickly in a small voice.

'Excellent. Give me a knife number five.' Alexis commanded deciding it was enough with comforting her. Otherwise, she'll collapse for real, he thought.

He was in the middle of his work, when someone entered the room and asked for him.

'No one is allowed in. There is a sign.' Alexis bulked at the intruder. 'Susan, did you forget to put out the sign?' He looked at his assistant who was across the table.

'No, doctor.' She replied.

'Doc, there is a call for you.' The man insisted.

'Not now. Take a message. Don't you know I cannot be disturbed?' Alexis said and returned to his work.

'It's your brother. He said it's urgent.' The man insisted.

'All right. Transfer him to this phone.' Alexis nodded to his desk and left the table. He went to rinse his gloved-hands, which were full of blood. The telephone rang. Alexis reached the desk and took the receiver.

'Yes, Marcus. I cannot talk to you now. I'm in the middle of an autopsy.' Alexis said quickly.

'Did you hear something?'

'No. What should I've hear about?' Alexis asked.

'Good. I'm all right. I'll come to you at seven. Be at home. I have some news for you.'

'About Anissia?' Alexis wanted to ask, but his brother had hanged up already. He glanced at the wall clock. It was a quarter to three. He returned to the table.

'Is there something wrong?' Susan was curious. It was one of the many negative things about her. Alexis preferred Miss Brown, who was silent and efficient, although he knew she was spying on all of them. He didn't care for that, as long as she was good at her job. He regarded himself as being loyal enough to be above any suspicion. Although, he knew it was not so, at present.

'Doctor, do you want me to take some samples for the laboratory?' Susan asked, suddenly.

'Why?' Her question stunned him.

'Doctor Rosenberg always takes some samples for testing. He taught me how to do it.' Susan said.

'In that case, do it.' Alexis agreed, wondering what she'd do next.

Susan turned to the instrument table and picked up a small scalpel and a few test tubes. Then, she began to take the same samples same way as he; Alexis did on the body of Gian Longis. It was a strange coincidence. He decided not to lose his time on dwelling about it. It was no longer important why. The important was, everyone knew about *Stimulazer* now and wanted to know if

anyone else was contaminated by radiation or not. Alexis waited until Susan completed her job and then he threw the white sheet over the dead body again.

'That'll be all for today.' He said, reaching the sink and turning the long handle of the tap. The water began to run. He took the soap and began to wash his gloved hands first. When all the blood was gone, he removed the gloves, threw them into the wastebasket and began slowly to soap his hands. After washing his hands and his face and drying them, he took off his green coat and put on the white one, as showing to everyone that his medical examiner job was over for the day.

'May I go now? Doctor Rosenberg asked me to come to his office the moment you didn't need me anymore.' Susan said.

'You can go, but not before having called the sanitary unit to put the body back to the morgue and having cleaned up here. I'll be in my office.' Alexis said removing the CD disk with the registration of the autopsy. Putting it into his breast pocket, he went to the door.

'Have a nice day, doctor.' Susan greeted him.

'You too.' He mumbled and went out. Quickly, Alexis crossed the long corridor and stopped at the lift. Even if his office was just one flight up he decided to take the lift, he was worn out after the morning's work.

'Hi, doc.' He turned to see one of his colleagues, who smiled at him strangely. Anyway, the greeting was too familiar and Alexis didn't like that either.

'Hi.' He replied the same way and looked expectantly at the man, who stepped backwards to increase the distance between them.

'Jerk,' Alexis thought and entered the lift, which arrived just then. He turned to look for the button and noticed the man standing where he was before. The door closed automatically and Alexis pressed the button to his floor. The lift moved and almost at once stopped again, the door opened, and Alexis stepped out colliding with Miss Brown.

'Good afternoon, Miss Brown. I was told you were out today but it looks like you're here after all.' Alexis said, smiling at her.

'Indeed!' The old spinster replied and turned away without greeting him or saying anything else. Alexis was stunned, he stood there, looking at her back. Something must be wrong; I wonder what's happened here today, he thought. Then he walked a few meters and entered his office. He went directly to his desk and sat into the armchair.

One glance at his desk told him that someone went through it. All his papers were in order, but not exactly as he had left them. Ever since the disappearance of Anissia, he became very careful. He always left his papers in a particular order known only to him.

This is why he noticed someone was looking for something.

Remembering Marcus's telephone call and putting all together, he began to worry. He glanced at his wristwatch. It was half past three. Marcus said he'd come at seven. It was three and half-hours away. There was no way to anticipate their meeting. He had to relax and try to go on with his normal working day. Alexis turned to his computer and switched it on. Then, he put the CD disk into the slot and pressed Enter. Nothing would upset him, not even the formidable Miss Brown, he thought.

He managed to stay in his office up to five. Then he decided it was enough. He left it. As he was crossing the building, he noticed the side-glances of many of his colleagues and none of them greeted him, or stopped for a short chat. Something must be wrong, he thought again, increasing his pace. He almost ran to his car. He took the driver's seat and rapidly started the engine as someone was on his tail. As he was passing the guard's gate, he noticed the guard turned his head away as escaping his glance. Alexis was now sure something terrible had happened and that it was connected to him. But what and how?

He didn't need to much wonder longer. Marcus rang his doorbell at seven sharp.

'At last! I thought you'd never come. What's going on in this

town? I was treated as a pariah by anyone who passed me. It was the most horrible experience.' Alexis stated, letting his brother in. He closed the door firmly, locked it on all three locks and turned to face Marcus who didn't pronounce a word yet.

'Well?' He prompted him.

'Look, Alex, you'd better sit first. It's all over. I'm alright.' Marcus said.

'What's over? I can see you're all right. That's all that you wanted to say?' Alexis was taken aback.

'No. I'm preparing you for the real news. Are you alright now?' Marcus said.

'What a stupid question! I'm always alright.' Alexis got annoyed.

'In this case, listen to my story.' Marcus said and told him about the events of the morning at the TV station. Alexis was so startled that he was motionless for a while and just continued to look around, as not knowing where he was.

'Alex, I'm here, with you. Robert let me go. It's over.' Marcus repeated.

'I don't think so.' At last, Alexis found his voice. He looked strangely at his brother and then said: 'That man is evil. I don't trust him.'

'You don't have to. He is a small fish. Issel is in charge of everything and he'll never let us down. Whatever I did, it's not important. That thing our ancestor invented for him, gave him seventy-five years of luxury life and security. He's not going to forget it.' Marcus said.

'And what about Anissia. Where is she? The more time is passing, the more I'm sure it was Robert's work to kidnap her. He was running after her. Tell me, why he didn't care for what's happened to her? I'll tell you why. Because he knows where she is.'

'I'm getting convinced as well. If you put it this way, he must be responsible for her disappearance. It's clear as day.' Marcus said.

'I must go to the Guardians Department, even if it's getting late. I'm there every day to ask about her.' Alexis said.

'Go there now and come to us for dinner. We'll be waiting for you. You'll tell us your news and also you won't need to cook today. Agreed?' Marcus proposed.

'I'll be at your house at half past eight. Thank Demetra for the dinner.' Alexis nodded, still looking confused.

They left the house together, Alexis heading for the Guardians Headquarters and Marcus back home.

Chapter 22

Contented with the results of his visit to Alexis, Marcus was slowly driving back to Demetra's house. He brushed aside all the bad thoughts and humming under his nose one of those musical's theme, he thought about his beautiful wife, waiting for him and decided it was not so bad to be a married man, after all. As he neared to the house, he noticed there were no lights on. It was strange, knowing that Demetra didn't care for darkness.

He turned to the driveway and stopped in front of the garage. He honked twice, hoping she will look through the window. But still, there was no sign of her. Suddenly, his heart began to pump heavy as warning him about something bad had happened. Quickly, he left the car and ran to the back door. He knocked hard, several times.

'Demetra, open the door. I'm here.' He screamed but inside him, he knew she was not there. 'Demetra, do you hear me?' He lost his head. With both hands, he was hammering into the door creating a tremendous noise. He didn't care if someone could hear him. Then he pushed the door with his boot and in that moment, he heard someone coming behind him. Marcus turned to face old Thomas.

'She's not there. I saw when they took her.' He whispered so low Marcus hardly heard him.

'Who are they?' Marcus took the old man by his collar. 'Tell me who are they? I'll kill anyone who'll hurt her.'

'You don't need to act as a mad man. You're not Barbò. Put yourself together and let's go to my house. I'll tell you everything. Let's go, quickly. I guess I'll be the next on their list.' Thomas said, gravely. His words fell as a bucket of cold water on Marcus sobering him up. He turned to walk to the man's house. They entered

in. Thomas locked his door quickly and beckoned to follow him. Marcus knew Thomas was going to the famous closet.

'Well, what did you see?' Marcus asked urgently, once they were in the closet, locked away from the rest of the world.

'I went to the kitchen to get something to eat; I don't keep track of time anymore. I eat when I feel too. I drank my coffee and went to the sitting room to get a tot of Brandy. By chance, I glanced through the window and saw Demetra surrounded by three Guardians, walking to their patrol car. She was dressed normally as going out for a walk. In one of her hands, she carried a sport bag, similar to those as people use to go to the gym. I saw her from the back. All of them quickly went into the car. It left at all speed in the direction of the State Headquarters, I guess.' Thomas concluded.

'Why haven't you been arrested in the morning? I mean, at the TV station?' Marcus was now suspicious of the old man. He was the one who had brought the trouble on them with his PC board, his help with the assault at the TV station and his ideas of revenge of the death of his wife. Maybe, they were all made up stories to blackmail him and Demetra. Why Thomas had that soundproof closet. He said he'd made it, but what if it was made for him to infiltrate into the Underground movement? He had to be a mole, working for the State Committee. Thomas had to be involved into a conspiracy to destroy their resistance, Marcus decided.

'You didn't answer my question.' Marcus hissed at him.

'I had nothing to do with the State. Trust me; I'm on your side. I don't know why they haven't arrest me. I thought they'd do that. There are so many things going on, that I've lost my head. There are manifestations everywhere organised no one knows by who. Clashes between demonstrators and guardians. They're mostly Barbò, but there are also some Stakhanò. I didn't know what to think. You should know better about all these things than I do.' Thomas said.

'Why do you think I should know better?' Marcus interrogated him.

'You're young and went around. You've seen the World. I haven't. I'm alone. The only woman with whom I've spent all my life was taken from me. I want to die, but not before I'll revenge her death.' Thomas said.

'I've heard it before. I'm holding you responsible for Demetra's arrest. If you do not help me to get her out from there, I'll kill you. Or else, I'll report you about your help to the Underground resistance.' Marcus said. The horrified expression on the old man's face told Marcus he was not an informer and had nothing to do with Demetra's arrest. Why did they take her then?

'I'm going back to the house. If you want to say something to me, come and say it, but quickly. I'll be leaving soon for the Guardians headquarters.' Marcus said harshly and rose.

'Please, believe me. I'm innocent. I'll do everything that you want me to free her.' Thomas murmured. His face was pale, his grey hair was in disarray and all his appearance was that of a complete lost person. Marcus felt pity for him, but didn't show it. His mind was already working on finding ways of freeing Demetra. She was his wife and had to be treated with respect. No one had the right to take away a wife without informing her husband about her whereabouts. Karsland was a country of steel enforcement of all laws, marital ones especially.

Entering the house, Marcus found it as he had left it moments before. Demetra didn't have time to start the cooking. It meant she was taken away soon after his departure, as Thomas said. Marcus went to the bedroom, but he could not see any changes there.

He returned to the sitting room and went to the trolley bar. He took a bottle of Cognac, his preferred liquor, and poured some into one of the glasses. He took it and went to the sofa. He sat and drank it, trying to calm himself down. He just waited until the Cognac did its job and only afterwards, he would start making plans for freeing Demetra. He sat for a long time, absently glancing around, millions thoughts ran in his head but still he could

not find the acceptable solution to his problem. The ringing of the doorbell brought him down to the earth.

'Damn it. Who could it be? Maybe the Guardians decided to arrest me as well?' He thought, rising from his seat. The bell rang repeatedly.

'Coming.' He raised his voice and walked to the main door. However, before opening it, he looked through the peep-hole and the ear-splitting laughter filled the house. He unlocked the door and opened it wide to see his brother, Alexis.

'What's wrong with you? Have you gone crazy all of the sudden?' He said, stepping in and closing the door behind him.

'I should, but I haven't.' Marcus replied. Alexis glanced around the room.

'And Demetra?' Alexis asked, but he read the answer on the desperate expression on his brother's face.

'Where is Demetra?' He asked again, knowing already the answer.

'Your guess is right. She was taken away by the Guardians.' Marcus murmured.

'No.' Alexis said and lowered into the sofa. None of them said a word for a while, thinking about their problem.

'Did you find out anything about Anissia?' Marcus was the first to break the silence.

'No. I went to the Guardians department and again, for the third time, reported her as a missing person. There was the same clerk, who pretended to never have seen me before. When I've told him I'm her fiancé, his eyes bulged, almost getting out of its orbits. Then he stated it is impossible that someone could kidnap someone's fiancée in our country. I told him I wanted to speak with his superior. He became furious and went out. It took a quarter of an hour until he was back with the other clerk. Both of them neared to me and just looked at me. In that moment, Robert Young entered the room. We saw each other. At first, I wanted to pretend I didn't know him, but then I decided to speak to him.' Alexis stopped for a second. Then he continued: 'I greeted him and told

him about Anissia. His face changed at the sound of her name. I could bet my head he knows something about her. However, he told me he hasn't seen her and knew nothing about her. I said I'll be back tomorrow, hoping they'll begin to look for her. I reminded them they're the only department in charge of the search of missing persons. That's all.' Alexis finished his story. Anissia was less fortunate than Demetra. There were no witnesses when she was taken away, Marcus concluded.

'Tell me about Demetra now.' Alexis asked.

'I was more fortunate than you were. Somebody saw when Demetra was taken away. I know for sure, she was arrested and had to be brought to the Preliminary detention quarters in the Guardians headquarters.' Marcus said.

'Let's go there. I'll go with you. Maybe Anissia is with her.'

'Why should she?' Marcus was taken aback by his brother's assumption.

'Anissia is not the type to run away. She's serious and responsible. Maybe they took her the same way as Demetra. I don't know why, but there must be some reason why these girls were arrested. Let's go.' Alexis said, rising from the sofa.

'There is no rush. I guess it'll be better for me to go alone to see our president, Issel. He's the one who got me that job and helped me all my life. I want to know from him what he thinks about Demetra's arrest.' Marcus said.

'Are you sure he can help you? I don't think he'll be so nice to you now. If Demetra was taken by the Guardians, for sure he knew about it before hand.' Alexis said.

'Don't go anywhere. Stay here until I'm back. At least you'll be the one who in case, could look for us, if I'll not return.' Marcus said and rose from his seat.

'I'll wait for you. Try to be fast.' Alexis agreed taking off his coat.

'I'll be here in one hour time.' Marcus said and went to the door. He still had his coat on ever since he had entered the house.

* * *

A strange, scratchy sound was coming from somewhere, at the beginning just hardly audible but with each moment growing louder, vibrating on higher notes faster and faster, persistently entering the brain, creating spiral-like motions so powerful that her head started to throb violently, forcing her to concentrate all her being on trying to resist to its strength. The alien sound was getting stronger and more persistent. Her brain was registering at higher speed and tried to fight it with all its power. The longer the invasion continued, the less energy was left in her. She felt that her resistance was diminishing. It was as being in the middle of a typhoon, fighting it, but all the way knowing it would win in the end. Her sense of self-preservation was telling her to escape, but her body was not obeying her commands. She could not move. Suddenly, she was afraid, afraid of that unknown power taking over her. Cold sweat covered her body and she was shaking out of deep fear. Her brain was telling her to scream, but she had no voice. It told her to run, but she could not. She lay motionless on the floor with her arms widely spread, her legs stretched and facing the ceiling. The time had stopped for her, losing its meaning. She had no feelings at all, but of fear. She felt as something huge, dark, of a strange unknown form was pushing her firmly into the floor, as trying to flatten her into a thin slice or squeeze her to some kind of juice. In her head, she was fighting it fiercely, but in reality she could just hardly breathe. She thought that was the end of her. In one moment, all her life passed in front of her. She saw herself as a little girl riding a tricycle, as a teenager, memorizing endless mathematical formulas, as a bride standing next to her groom, a woman admiring the perfect body of her newlywed husband. Her thoughts ran faster and faster, making her unable to register its flow and then darkness abruptly fell on her. For the first time in her life, she felt unconscious.

'She'll be all right. Give her 200 corvalol with 300 paladen. She'll wake up any moment now.' Demetra heard a man's voice that sounded so loud for her that she wanted to block her ears. She tried to move her hands or legs but could not. The thought of

being paralysed horrified her. With all her will she forced herself to move, but all that she was able to do was to slightly shift the small finger of her left hand.

'She's awake.' Demetra heard the same voice. This time, she tried to open her eyes. She did. At first, she saw nothing but the fog, which slowly cleared, and somebody was near her in a white coat a sterile mask covering his face.

'I'm terminally ill. This doctor is trying to reanimate me.' She thought.

'Thank you.' She said it loud but for the person near her, it sounded as a heavy breathing.

'She's trying to say something.' She heard the same voice, but this time she didn't try to speak. She knew she had lost her voice.

'Can you hear me? If you can, close your eyes once and open again.' Demetra did as she was told.

'She can hear. It's good. I hope we can recuperate her after all. Nurse, give her mixture of 200 corvalol and 300 paladen.' The same voice commanded.

'Yes, doctor.' Demetra heard the woman's voice coming from somewhere far.

Then the doctor disappeared from her view and the woman appeared, dressed in a light blue coat, sterile mask on her face. She was wearing eyeglasses, which Demetra found of being very strange. No one she knew used eyeglasses. In Karsland, the eyesight was corrected in early childhood. Theoretically, everyone had perfect eyesight. Demetra closed her eyes again. She was tired, too tired even to keep her eyes opened.

Then she felt the woman was near her, but she could not figure out what she was doing to her. Demetra didn't feel the pain of the syringe pinching. She didn't know what they were doing to her, but she didn't care for it anymore. She wanted to sleep only.

* * *

The snow continued to fall heavily all day until all roads were covered with a thick, white blanket, making impossible the

normal circulation of the traffic. No one cared about it. Barbò didn't have the right to own a car, and Stakhanò, who did, preferred to stay at home with such bad weather.

It was not so for Marcus, who stubbornly stood at the entrance of the Guardians Department holding the sign: "Free my wife."

Four days had passed since Demetra's arrest. He went to Mr Issel that night to speak about her, but to his astonishment, Mr Issel refused to see him. It was beyond his belief. He knew there had to be something prepared against him too, but he didn't care for it. All that he wanted was to get his wife back. He didn't allow himself to think about what they could have done to her to persuade her to speak. He knew they were capable of any dirty trick with all that medications they had created over the last several centuries under the pretence of helping prolong the life of their citizen, "for their own good". *Stimulazer* was an excellent example of their care for their people.

'Marcus, let's go home. Don't you see it's getting dark and very cold? You'll get ill. All of them went home anyway. There are only a few guards left. Tomorrow will be another day.' Alexis came to persuade his older brother to return home.

'Leave me alone. I know what I'm doing. Not for nothing, I've spent some years abroad. I saw how it's done. When they'll see I'm persistent, they'll be the ones to approach me. If they'll see I'm not, there is no chance to see Demetra again. I know those vultures. Go to the house and wait for me there. Come here tomorrow in the morning and we can speak better. I'll be here as long as my body can stand this cold.'

'Drink this. It's hot tea with sugar and lemon, as you like.' Alexis gave him a thermos.

'Thanks.' Marcus said, taking it.

'I'll be waiting for you with a hot dinner.' Alexis said and left at once. Marcus unscrewed the cork of the bottle. Hot steam was coming out from it. He inhaled the delicious aroma, but refrained from drinking. It was too hot.

'What do you think you're doing here?' Suddenly he heard a harsh voice coming from the left. He pretended not to hear it, but he knew he had won his first battle. At last, his manifestation was over.

'Did you hear me? I told you to go away.' The tall, bulky man in uniform of the State Guardians approached him and pulled him roughly by the sleeve. The hot tea spilled on the ground. By good chance, it didn't reach Marcus, who got angry at such rough treatment.

'I'm free to stand where I want. Our Constitution allows private manifestation of any kind, as long as I'm not using arms to conspire to overthrow the State. I'm demanding that you free my wife. I want to know why she was arrested and what charges were brought against her.' Marcus was firm.

'If you don't go away, I have orders to arrest you.' The man said calmly.

'Do it. Arrest me. Take me to my wife. At least I'll see her.' Marcus was shouting now.

'Instead of acting as a mad man, you should go to the Legal Advice office, where such cases are handled.' The man said, suddenly freeing his sleeve. For a moment, Marcus was stunned by his words, but when he came to his senses to ask him some questions, the man already disappeared behind the corner.

What could it mean? Was it a good advice or a dirty trick to catch him into their net? Marcus stood, perplexed by that event. For sure, there was nothing wrong in knowing about the existence of lawyers. From the childhood they were told there was no need to have lawyers in Karsland, since there was no crime. Marcus sincerely believed to that. In addition, they were told there was no need for keeping an army either, being the most peaceful country in the World. However, he had seen with his own eyes the sign "OFF LIMITS ZONE", not speaking about the military facilities inside the cave. It looked like there were many lies in Karsland, Marcus decided.

As for the possibility of being caught in their trap, Marcus won-

dered why he didn't get arrested yet. If they took his wife, why not him?

Day after day, analysing the conduct of the Rulers, he had come to the conclusion that Odin was right fighting them. How may one overturn the State, with bare hands? Stakhanò, the same as Barbò, had no permission to carry arms. Guardians armed to the teeth. Why? Who were they afraid of? Who did they protect? Those four days and nights spent in front of the State Guardians Headquarters, with temperatures of below zero degrees Celsius, made Marcus' brain to work faster than ever did. He began to see many things, which he didn't before.

It's true he had never cared for all those laws and regulations, which he regarded as bureaucratic backlash of comocratia. Only then, he had realised the power of those who were the real weapons against population. Stupid of me, he thought. There had to be lawyers to create all those laws. Moreover, Legal Advice office is its cradle. Thank you for the advice, he addressed the unknown man, wondering if he did it out of pity or was following the orders of his superiors. He knew he would never know the truth. Nevertheless, he made up his mind to visit that office. He went directly to the information desk in the Guardians Headquarters.

'Where is the Legal Advice office?' He asked brusquely.

'It's not in this building, for sure. Anyway, it's closed now. Come tomorrow, the earlier the better.' The clerk replied, unperturbed by his rudeness.

At seven o'clock sharp Marcus was already at the door of the legal office. It was still dark and very cold. Gusts of freezing wind blew strongly into his face, making it difficult to breath. It was the coolest time of the year, the end of January and there was no way to escape it. He pulled up the collar of his sheering coat and glanced around. He was not alone there. There were a few others, who had already formed a queue stretching to the huge door, which would open at ten.

'Who's the last?' Marcus asked loud.

'I am.' A small woman answered. He took the place behind her.

'It's my third time here. First time I came at ten o'clock, at the opening. I found a queue of at least fifty people. I didn't enter the office that day. They are slow at work. Second time, I was wiser and came at eight. It took me six hours of waiting until I entered. Today I know it will take about an hour before I'll be seen by somebody there.' The woman started the conversation. Marcus didn't reply, preferring to keep a low profile. The woman looked at him suspiciously and turned away.

'Next.' It was Marcus's turn at last. He entered the building following the man. They walked along a long corridor until the man stopped near one of the doors covered with black leather. He pressed the button on the right and after a while someone said: 'Come in.'

'Enter now.' The man pushed slightly Marcus to the door. Marcus didn't need a second invitation. He turned the handle and opened the door wide. He stepped in.

It was like a dream. When he saw in the old movies the offices of Soviet KGB, he was always very sceptical about their existence. He doubted the truth of those films, knowing they could have been made up to promote the comocratia. Now he was standing in one of those offices, or a very similar one. It was a big rectangular room with two windows on the left and on the right were glass-covered shelves, full of some books or files, Marcus could not see properly. At the far end were a huge writing desk and a big leather armchair in which sat a thin woman, dressed in uniform of the Guardians, facing him.

Marcus continued to stand, not knowing what to do next.

'Come closer. Take a seat.' The woman commanded in a low stern voice. Marcus obeyed. He took a seat in front of the desk and looked at her.

'Well, what's your problem?' She asked coolly.

'My wife was detained without reason. I went to the Guardians but no one told me anything about her. She disappeared. If it

wasn't for a witness who saw her being taken away, I wouldn't know what's happened to her.' Marcus started. The woman's face was a marble mask, no muscle moved during his speech.

'What do you want from us?' She asked pretending her ignorance.

'I want my wife back. That's all.' Marcus was curt. Inside him was a fury, but he did everything to hold his temper in check. He didn't want that it could be used against him.

'You're sure your wife was not involved in any of the recent demonstrations. Is she loyal to the State Committee?'

'More than she should be.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing. Just thinking out loud. My wife is a normal citizen; she's Stakhanò and as all of us, is loyal to the country and the State Committee. I don't see any reason for her detention.' Marcus said firmly.

'If you're so sure of her innocence, let's fill in these forms. What's your name?' The woman said and began to fill the various papers, asking Marcus many questions. He was asked about parents, grandparents, their dates of births and deaths, if known. Their social status, profession, and so on. In some cases, Marcus could not give an answer, since he didn't know much about his family. He never had too much interest.

Then he was asked many questions about Demetra and her family. Marcus admitted being married for just one month.

'Was marriage consumed?' The woman lifted her eyebrows.

'Of course.' Her interrogation annoyed Marcus.

'In this case, you're right to demand the return of your wife who may be already pregnant.' The woman looked directly into his eyes as wanting to find out his plans regarding his family. Marcus met her eyes with a stony face. He'll be damned if he'll let her know he was not ready to have children and haven't got plans to get them straight away. He sensed this question may be the key to Demetra's release.

'That's all for today. In one week, come here to inquire about your case. We don't call anyone or make any appointments. It depends fully on you to care for the progress of it.' She said slowly, arranging the papers with his information into the file.

'What do you mean "next week"? I demand her release immediately.' Marcus couldn't keep his anger any longer.

'I know you want it today but besides yours, I've many other cases which must be followed as well. You're not the only one here. I've understood your problem, and I'll look into it. This is all that I can say to you. As for the release of your wife, it doesn't depend on me. Do you have any more questions?' She said.

'I want to make an enquiry about the best girlfriend of my wife, who had disappeared recently too.' Marcus said suddenly, deciding to push Anissia's case as well.

'Your wife's best girlfriend?' First time Marcus noticed some interest in her voice.

'Yes. Her name is Anissia Teremoff. She's Stakhanò. She's my brother's fiancée. She disappeared soon after New Year's Day. No one saw her leaving the house. My brother reported to the Guardians but there is no news up to today.' Marcus said.

Marcus noticed the woman's face had changed drastically. She seemed of resembling more a human than a piece of marble. The story of Anissia touched something inside of that formidable person. Marcus was able to have a glimpse of the vulnerable woman, behind her cold mask.

'Well, I'll try to do what I can. Give me her data.' She took a new pack of papers and began the same procedure for Anissia as she did for Demetra. Only, this time she was less reluctant to do it.

'You can go now. I'll call you the day after tomorrow, in the afternoon.' She said and rose from her armchair. Marcus did the same.

'Thanks.' He said. She kept silent. Marcus nodded and went to the door quickly. He was on a rush to be out from that awful place.

* * *

'Are you sure she agreed to look into Anissia's case too?' Alexis demanded of Marcus for the third time.

'Yes, she did. I've told you everything that's passed in that room. She said she'd call me the day after tomorrow, in the afternoon. These were her exact words.' Marcus repeated, irritated.

'I still cannot believe into our luck. What do you think about that Guardian? Who do you think had sent him to you?'

'How should I know? I guess he was tired to see me standing there for four days and felt pity for me, freezing in front of him while he was in a warm room, enjoying his life. The life of Guardians in the office is a paradise, as you know. They do nothing all day, typical for the State employee.' Marcus said.

'I wish it was an order from above.' Alexis whistled.

'I wish it too. By the way, where is that famous hot dinner you've promised to me? I'm famished.' Marcus rose from the sofa in the sitting room where the brothers were having their conversation and went to the kitchen.

'Waiting for you.' Alexis followed his brother.

Ever since Demetra's arrest, the brothers have lived together in her house, deciding it was the best to be together in such dangerous time. In addition, it was closer to the State Headquarters, which was convenient for both of them.

Chapter 23

The morning started as usual for Marcus with the rooster alarm coming on at seven o'clock, ten minutes of gymnastics to strengthen his muscles and a brief breakfast consisting of coffee and brioche. Right in the moment when he had finished tidying the kitchen before leaving it, the ringing of the doorbell broke the calmness of the morning. Its sound was persistent and ear-splitting.

'Coming, who's there? Release that bell. Stop ringing.' Marcus shouted jolting from the kitchen. He was alone in the house; Alexis had a night shift and would be back around nine.

Someone continued to press the button bell. Speedily, Marcus reached the main door and opened it wide not bothering to look through the peephole. Since Demetra's arrest, he didn't care for anything but her return.

'Is it your wife?' The high-pitched voice was sarcastic. Marcus turned his head at the sound and shortly thought his eyes were playing a trick on him. He saw Demetra in a wheelchair, behind of which stood a small wizard-like man, who sniffed his nose, looking at him with loathing, but the sight of his wife horrified him.

'Demetra!' He shouted kneeling in front of her and grabbing her hands. They were cold and non-responding. She looked at him and smiled faintly but didn't move.

'Oh, my God. What did you do to her?' He jumped on his feet and took the second man by his breast coat.

'Take your hands off me. I've nothing to do with your wife. We're delivery men.' He angered, shaking off Marcus's hands from him.

'It looks like we've brought her to the right house. Take her and sign my paper of delivery.' The small man said, handing his papers to Marcus who, looked as someone who had lost his head.

'Sign. Here.' The man insisted.

'Where?' At last, Marcus understood what was wanted from him.

'Anywhere. It's for my boss; to show him you've accepted my delivery.'

'How can you speak like this? She's my wife and a human being.' Marcus revolted.

'Maybe she was before, but now, we'll see. By the way, doctor said, she'll recover in two months with good care. Don't worry. Otherwise, they don't send them back.' Both men laughed loud at their joke and went away. Marcus looked at their backs: not too far from the house, there was a white van with three red stripes that meant it was a hospital van of the State Committee. Dirty dogs, he cursed and turned to his wife.

She smiled at him serenely, but didn't speak.

He went around, pushed her wheelchair into the house, and closed the door.

He sat on the nearest chair and looked at her, terrified by her condition. Then he rose suddenly, went to the telephone, and dialled his brother's office number.

'Hello, Dr Vanderson speaking.'

'Dr Vanderson, hell. Alex, they've brought Demetra back, but she's paralysed. She's not speaking, not moving. Come, come quickly. I don't know what to do. Come at once. I'm getting crazy.' Marcus shouted into the receiver.

'What? Demetra, what? Have you gone crazy?' Alexis could not believe what he had heard.

'I told you, come at once. Demetra was brought back. She's terminally ill.' Marcus repeated and hung up. He sat again on the chair and looked at her. Demetra smiled at him, with all the ethereal happiness that was always on the faces of Karsland citizen.

'I must be the luckiest woman on Earth, if my husband is so worried and concerned about me. My love, I'm all right. I know I'll be all right. My heart tells me I'll be alright.' Demetra thought, looking at him with that smile which drove him crazy.

It took over an hour until Alexis arrived. All that time Marcus sat and looked at her, understanding his full hopelessness to do something to bring her back to her old self.

'What's going on here?' Alexis opened the door with his key and stopped at the threshold at the sight of Demetra.

'There is nothing to be worried about.' He said nurse-like way and neared to her.

'Welcome home, Demetra. Look, if you can hear me, close your eyes once.' Alexis said, taking her hand into both of his. Both of them looked at her waiting for her signal. Demetra closed her eyes once.

'Good girl. She can hear; it's an excellent sign. She'll be soon on her feet again.' Alexis concluded, squeezing her hand slightly. She closed her eyes quickly twice. 'And now she has said to me "No".' Alexis bent to her and pecked her on the cheek. 'Good girl.'

'What did they say when they brought her?' Alexis turned to his brother.

'To sign the delivery paper. Then one of them said, their doctor said she'll be alright in two months.'

'Don't get desperate. You're lucky, she's back. Otherwise, you'd never seen her again.' Alexis said.

'It's exactly what those men said. How comforting!' Marcus said sarcastically.

'We must get a nurse for her. It'll be best if you, as a husband, could request one. Then I'll be the one who'll instruct the nurse on how to take care of her.' Alexis suggested.

'What shall I do? Call an emergency centre?' Marcus was still disoriented.

'I guess it's better if I'll do it myself.' Alexis decided and went to the phone. Marcus just looked at him. A quarter of an hour later, a white van with three red stripes, identical to the other, stopped in their driveway.

'Alexis, they're back.' Marcus called and ran to the door, wondering what those men wanted from him again.

'Where's your patient?' Three individuals in white coats, saying they were medical staff, were at the door. This time, it was an emergency team.

'We were waiting for you. Come in.' Marcus sighed in relief.

'I'm a medical doctor. This is my unfortunate sister-in-law. She's Stakhanò, as all of us. We want to keep her at home until full recovery. Could you assign one of your nurses to us? Female preferable.' Alexis said. The three of them exchanged their glances at the sight of Demetra, but no one asked any question or made any comment. After a long pause, one of the men who was in charge, asked Marcus: 'Is she your wife?' He nodded. 'Don't get desperate! We have had similar cases over the last few months. Most of the other patients recovered at the hospital, in the Neurology department. If you want to keep her at home, no problem. We'll provide a nursing care around the clock. Soon she'll be back on her feet.' Marcus kept silent.

'Thanks. When will your nurse arrive?' Alex asked.

'In one hour time. We need patient's data. Her ID batch will do.'

Marcus went to the bedroom, where was her small writing desk and took her ID batch from one of its drawers. He brought it with him and gave to the man.

'Thanks.' The man passed it through the slot of a hand computer, which he carried with him. Then he returned it to Marcus.

'That's all. Wait for a nurse. Good luck.' They left the house.

'Do you think that nurse will be here shortly?' Marcus doubted their promise.

'Of course. They know everything about us. They know what's wrong with Demetra. Don't forget it's the State Committee' Emergency Unit. They know how to treat her.' Alexis comforted him.

'Don't worry my handsome husband. I'll be soon in good hands and get well. All our life is in front of us.' Demetra thought smiling ethereally at Marcus who, looking at her and seeing that smile felt the urge of killing everyone who was responsible for torturing her.

'Maybe she wants to eat or drink. How can we feed her? What can I do about it?' Marcus asked.

'Wait until the nurse arrives. She'll take care of everything, I'm sure of it.' Alexis replied. On that, he was right.

Nurse Nina, as she presented herself, was of a medium height, dark haired young woman dressed in white coat: three red stripes were sewn on the shoulders, identifying her as belonging to the Emergency Unit.

'Is it my patient?' She asked in a low pleasant voice, which dispersed all Marcus's worries suddenly. 'What a beauty she is!' The nurse took Demetra's weak hand and squeezed it gently. 'Don't worry; you'll be on your feet sooner than you think.' It looks like an old tune, Marcus thought at hearing her words, but he didn't say anything.

'What an ethereal smile she has!' Nurse said looking at the girl.

'As all of your patients, am I right?' Alexis said quickly.

'You're right. All of them had the same smile. I guessed it's the illness that makes them smile like that.' Nurse replied. Alexis was sure then that Demetra was given a high dose of some medicine, which disturbed the part of central nerve system dealing with motion. They tortured her; he thought, but didn't dare to say it, unless he wanted Marcus to get terrified more than he already was.

'Did some of your patients recover?' Alexis asked casually.

'Oh, yes. All three of them which I've nursed. She'll be fine.' Nurse said. Then she began her duty: 'show me the room where she'll be staying. I must organise it.'

'Come with me.' Alexis volunteered.

Marcus continued to sit for a while, after Alexis and Nurse had pushed Demetra's wheelchair out of the room. He was furious at everything and everyone. In his mind passed thousands schemes of revenge, but he knew none of those could be successfully implemented. The telephone rang, but he didn't hear it, until Alexis called him from somewhere, telling him to pick it up.

'Yes.' Marcus answered it at last.

'Robert Young speaking.' Marcus kept silent. 'Hi, Marcus, I've recognised your voice. I'm calling on behalf of Mr Issel. Tomorrow at ten o'clock, there'll be a meeting at his office. You must be present. Did you get your Demetra back?' He roared mockingly and hung the phone. Robert didn't need to wait for a confirmation; no one could refuse the order coming from Mr Albert Issel, the President of the State Committee. Marcus cursed the man and all that was connected to him.

'Who was it?' Alexis entered the room.

'Robert Young. Tomorrow I must be at Issel's office at ten.'

'Why?' Alexis' question hanged in the air as the doorbell rang again.

'Who could it be now?' Marcus went to the door again. He opened it to see Liz Issel. 'Not you again. What do you want now? I've enough problems without you.' He wrinkled his nose.

'I have some news about Anissia.' She said.

'Anissia?' Both brothers asked in unison looking at her. She nodded. They waited for her to continue.

'I've heard she's in one of those laughing academies where they'd kept some of the very ill people for years,' she said looking at Alexis.

'No,' he shouted forgetting where he was, 'it's not possible. Who put her there? She did nothing wrong to anybody. I'll kill anyone who did this to her.'

'Are you sure of it?' Marcus asked Liz.

'Yes, I am.' She confirmed and continued in the sign language: 'I've heard the conversation between Robert Young and my father. They spoke about both girls. My father was blaming Robert for Demetra's arrest. He thought it was needless and cruel, since she was a woman and was not involved directly in the resistance. As for Anissia, Robert told my father he took care of her. She'll be a lamb until the end of her days, he said. As soon as I could, I ran here to tell you about it. You must find ways to

get poor Anissia out from Robert's hands, although I don't think she'll ever recover. No one did.' Liz signed.

'How about Demetra?' Marcus signed to her.

'She'll be all right. It's a temporary condition. Robert didn't dare to use the latest drugs on her. She's a married woman, not as Anissia, who has no family.' Liz signed.

Alexis was so shocked he was not in condition to sign or to speak. He just plonked himself on the nearest chair and glanced around with empty eyes. How could such terrible things happen to two good and proper women under the pathetic pretext of keeping the freedom in Comocratia?

* * *

At ten o'clock sharp Marcus entered Mr Albert Issel's office.

'Come in. We're waiting for you.' The voice of the President was calm and inviting, as nothing wrong happened between them. Marcus looked around and met Odin's eyes, determined and angry. Robert sat on the right of Mr Issel and sticking to country's regulations, Marcus took the chair on Odin's right.

'Hi.' He greeted Odin.

'Hi. How is Demetra? I've heard she's back.'

'She is fine.' Marcus replied without revealing details of her condition.

'I've called you in here to discuss what could be done to bring our country to its normal conditions. You know better than I do that over the last two months there were hundreds of clashes with police and thousands of people were wounded, not mentioning about the over two hundred who died.' Mr Issel started.

'Your Guardians do their job well.' Odin commented.

'Yes, they do.' Issel replied. 'Anyone who's taking part in the manifestations stopped to watch TV and their body returned to function normally, which means their animal's instincts took over and we're no longer in control of their tempers. Thanks to both of you.' He nodded to the men sitting across him.

'It's better this way than to be a docile, stupid slave.' Odin replied not able to keep quiet.

'I'd agree with you, but for one small thing: in one month in this country were registered hundred per cent more crime of any kind, in comparison with any other country in Europe. We cannot afford to have it. No, we cannot.' The President stated.

'For the first time in their life these people experienced freedom, the real one, not the one you've created for them. You know well the danger of radiation on a human body. But no. You've used that device, *Stimulazer*, whose functioning is based on the fission of atoms. Whatever minimal reaction that is, after a while it has accumulated an amount of damages big enough in poor Barbò bodies to make them terminally ill. Remember Gian Longis? He was murdered, but he would have died anyway from contamination from radiation. You didn't care for anyone, including your own daughter. The only important thing was for you to keep your diabolical job, of the keeper of the stolen treasure. You're a dirty thief who robbed the World's population of the joy of admiring the beauty created for centuries by their ancestors, whatever civilizations they were. You and your associates are despicable and you must be imprisoned, not these poor things who revolted for their freedom.' Odin finished his accusations. Albert Issel applauded to him, smiling ironically.

'Bravo. I can see you're an excellent speaker, the same as your grandfather was. I've heard him when I was a boy. I agree with you on all that you've said, but there are many other things that you don't know and even if you did, you'd never understand them. There is no reason to continue this conversation.' The president replied.

'You must put both of them into one of my research institutions. There they'll teach them how to speak and to think.' Robert Young busted in.

'You're bloodthirsty as usual, Robert. I've another solution to our country's problem. This is why I've called all of you here.'

Albert Issel paused, glancing at each of them. Then he said the thing that left the three of them speechless: 'I want to discuss with you what the best way to hold a referendum is.'

'Referendum?' Marcus lifted his eyebrows.

'Are you surprised? Yes, the old-fashioned referendum where every citizen of eighteen years age and older has the right to express his opinion. They can vote 'Yes', for keeping the existing system of TV watching, without mentioning the *Stimulazer* or 'No', for rejecting the existing system and establishing a new system, or better to say, the old democratic system, where everyone must work for its keeping. Everyone is equal, no more class distinction.' Issel stopped, looking directly at Odin.

'Are you not afraid to lose?' Odin met his challenge blankly.

'I come from a gambler's family. My ancestors used to play poker and always won. I'm a gambler too. Let's see who'll win.' Issel replied.

'Albert, we cannot do such thing. We'll lose everything.' Robert protested.

'Shut up, Robert. Don't tell me what to do. It's your fault we're facing such revolt. If you'd done your job better, I wouldn't be sitting here, listening to insults and offering solutions.' Issel angered.

'I don't see the reason of being here, since you already know what you'll do next.' Odin said sarcastically.

'The only reason you're here and not in prison is to tell you that you're free to do whatever you need to do, in order to win this referendum. If you'll lose, I'll be the one who decides what to do with you.' At last, Issel showed his ace card.

'Do you mean, I can start a campaign against the evils of your State and your treatment of its citizens, and let them know about the hidden treasure, without being arrested?' Odin asked, not believing to what he had just heard.

'Yes, you can. I'm not going to arrest you or any of your friends, of course, except for your brother-in-law, who's a murderer and is condemned to spend the rest of his life in prison.' Issel said.

'How about Anissia?' Marcus asked.

'She'll stay where she is. It's too late for her.' Robert said.

'You're a bastard. You've drugged her until she became insane. This is why you cannot release her from there.' Marcus shouted in rage.

'I've nothing to do with it. I didn't put her there.' Robert declined their accusations on the spot.

'I know you did. I have a witness who can prove it was you.' Marcus insisted.

'If it's so, Robert will pay for it. But you must bring your proof before.' Mr Issel intercepted smoothly.

'We'll do that.'

'This and any other case we'll solve, after the referendum.' Issel stated.

'As long as I know that Anissia will be back to her home, I don't mind to wait until after the referendum. I've agreed at your conditions: the winner will judge the loser.' Odin said firmly.

'Referendum will be on the first of April, the old fool's day. It's the best day for voting. As I've pointed out already, you can use any method to win the referendum: all media is yours: TV, newspapers and radio. I have no problem about it. The winner will judge the loser.' Mr Issel repeated.

Odin and Marcus exchanged their glances. They could not speak to each other in front of their adversaries and have had no other choice as to agree on Issel's conditions. Besides, Odin was sure Barbò would have been against the existing system, as the clashes between them and the State Guardians were a daily occurrence.

* * *

The sound of the alarm, her rooster alarm, awoke Demetra who was sleeping in the room next to her bedroom. She opened her eyes and thought it was time to rise from the bed and begin her morning chores in getting ready for work. She moved instinctively and felt her fingers for the first time since the Guardians took her.

'Marcus.' She shouted at the top of her lungs, but its sound was

just a weak whisper, which he heard anyway and ran to her bed through the adjoining door.

'Did you call for me?' Marcus switched on all lights in the room and went to her bed. She looked at him with wide-opened eyes and without that idiotic smile.

'My love, I've heard you.' He said reached her face and kissing her lightly on her lips. To his astonishment, he felt she moved her lips. He looked at her again and then heard her whisper: 'I must rise to go to work.' Suddenly he was very happy. She was back to his world from that of her torturers.

'I love you.' He shouted as a crazy, afraid she could not hear him. Then, he looked at her lips and could read her answer.

'I love you too.' Demetra shouted in her mind, but it was enough to know he understood her. Then she moved her fingers and Marcus saw it and thought he was getting mad after all that time, waiting for her recovery.

That day marked exactly one month since she was brought back to him on the wheelchair, barely a person, just a vegetable to be taken care of. He squeezed her hand and felt she answered to him by moving her fingers. It was enough for him.

'Nurse, where are you? Come here!' He shouted through the whole house. The guest room was on the other side. He heard the quick running steps. Soon, the sleepy face of the nurse appeared in front of him. She was still buttoning up her dressing gown.

'Sorry, I forgot to put my alarm. Is she alright?' She moved to look at Demetra.

'What luck! She's back.' Nurse exclaimed seeing Demetra's new expression and the normal size of the pupils of her eyes.

'She is. She tried to speak. She moved her fingers. That odious smile disappeared.' Marcus uttered happily.

'I've noticed that too. I believe from this moment, she'll be recovering fast.' Nurse said smiling to her patient, who was looking at her now.

* * *

The recovery of Demetra was taken as a good sign for the resistance group, which intensified their efforts in the campaign for winning the referendum. The printing machine at Odin's basement was running non-stop to print as many leaflets as possible. Barbò were not usually used to read anything, since they were encouraged from childhood to watch TV only. Due to that, the leaflets which every night were spread around the country in each post box of each Barbò and Stakhanò, were designed to catch their eye. Generally, the leaflets contents were a few catch phrases such as "Do you want to die from cancer? If not, vote NO in referendum."

They were allowed to debate on TV between opposite coalitions, but Marcus felt they didn't do well at it. The State Committee sympathizers always stressed on the hard manual work, showing labour camps of the Soviet Union, or Nazi concentration camps during the World War Two, warning the citizens that it could be repeated without Karsland's isolation from the Old Europe. For sure, it was not helping Odin to win since he marked on the health conditions of Barbò and the need for freedom for the human kind. Who knew if those could attract Barbò?

The house of Odin was full of young Barbò, who wanted to know more about the life of citizens in old Europe, although they had studied the subject at school. There was Martina or Marcus who were spending hours and hours describing the real life outside of Karsland. Ever since that TV station assault, Marcus was prohibited to enter any of the State Buildings. It was regarded as the biggest shame, but he could not care less.

He was happy with Demetra getting better and with the decision of making a referendum. He was sure, as Odin and everyone around them, they'd be the easy winners. From that moment, there was a chance to dismantle that country, return the treasure to its lawful owners. Lapland Cave would be back being in Karelia. Marcus and Demetra would be free to live there, have their children and lead a normal life in a normal country. That was the

dream, but they had to try anything to make it come true, Marcus thought.

* * *

'I'll do it by myself, Nurse.' Demetra said, slowly rising from the bed. She stood up without help and walked to the chair that was just two steps away. She reached it and grabbed its back to keep her balance. She was dizzy, but she was determined to be well before the referendum. She knew its conditions and wanted to stand next to her husband at any cost. She didn't like that Fool's day was chosen for referendum. It was a mocking act by Albert Issel and his associates to decide on that day.

'Let me do it.' Demetra angered at her nurse who was holding her by her elbow. She tried to free her arm, but could not.

'You shouldn't rush to walk. Take your time. You're back to your normal self, so take it easy. Let's sit in the bed for several days and only after that you should begin to rise and stand. Don't rush; otherwise, you may worsen your condition.' Nurse insisted.

'Don't speak nonsense. I'm well and better with each day. Soon, I won't need you at all.' Demetra replied curtly, making another step in the direction of the door.

'And where do you want to go?'

'Out of this room. I hate it. When I'll recover completely, I'm going to move out from this house. I hate it now. It'll always be the place of my worse suffering.'

Nurse Nina didn't reply. She just held her patient by the elbow. They slowly walked out from the room. Demetra led her to the kitchen first and then to the sitting room.

Chapter 24

'I've told you, Robert, you must be watchful. Haven't I?' Albert Issel was in his office. Robert Young sat across him and looking as a beaten dog. He knew Albert was right, but who'd have thought it would come to that.

'Remember, your future and mine depends on the results of this damned referendum.' Albert warned him.

'We could do the other way. We could arrest these three, four or dozens of these people involved into that resistance and everything would be calm and nice as before. No, you needed to let them go and invent that thing, which we'll lose, for sure. Only a fool would agree to continue to be bombarded by radiation for getting idle life. I don't believe there will be enough fools in this country for us to survive.' Robert lamented.

'I had no other choice. It was too late to get them to prison. Did you forget that TV station assault? Every Barbò saw them that day and could ask why we'd put them to prison. It could mean those people were right. By not getting them to prison, I have some leverage against them. Odin knows about that, but he thinks he'll be the winner. I don't know who will be, but for sure there are many Barbò who love their cosy flats and will never exchange them for something else, especially if they need to work for it.' Albert said, confidently.

'I hope you're right in this case.' Robert said.

'I am, as in many others.' Albert assured him glancing at his wristwatch. 'It's almost six. In two hours, time for voting is over. We'll know the results in less than half an hour after having closed the urns. Be patient and trust our luck.' Albert said and opened the book lying in front of him on his desk.

'What are you reading?' Robert got curious.

'Why, of course Emma by Jane Austen.' He smiled at Robert.

'Emma?' Robert could not believe his own ears. 'What's wrong with you?'

'Nothing. You should know I always read Fairy Stories when I am depressed and Jane Austen when I'm waiting for something special to be delivered to me.'

'I don't remember any of that stuff.'

'Bad. These stories are the combined memory of European people. By reading it, you can learn something that might be useful to you.'

Robert sniffed distastefully. He didn't believe into that garbage.

* * *

They were all there. Odin and Martina, Marcus and Demetra, Thomas Askold and others volunteers who have helped them during the campaign. It was the voting day. As soon as each of them cast their vote, they joined Odin in his house, deciding to stay there until the announcement of the results on the radio. Martina, as many Barbò, stopped to watch TV from the beginning of the revolt. Odin glanced at his wristwatch. It was six.

'In two hours time it'll be over. We'll be free to choose our own government and establish our own system. First of all, I'll abolish the caste system.' Odin triumphed, being sure their hard work will be richly rewarded.

'We must be patient and wait for the official results. Let's don't get carried away before then.' Thomas warned.

'I agree with Odin. We'll be winners.' Marcus said. Then he turned to Demetra, who was half lying on the sofa. She looked tired and tense. She was apprehensive and fearful, he thought.

'I'm one of the luckiest women in the world, to have such a handsome and virile husband. I must recover faster to be with him, in bed.' Demetra thought, looking at him. Somehow, she didn't care at all about the results of that referendum. Instead, she worried about Marcus being left alone for such a long time. It marked three months since their marriage, but they've spent together only a few nights.

'I don't think we'll win. Barbò are a shrewd folk.' Martina said slowly, looking through the window.

'Refreshments are ready.' Nurse Nina rolled in the teacart. She volunteered to serve them, leaving Demetra in the hands of her husband.

'Help yourselves.' She added, taking the plate and beginning to serve herself. One after the other they went to have something to eat and drink, enjoying being busy in those critical hours of waiting.

Odin put on some music, dissolving the tense atmosphere by bringing some carefree attitude. Some jokes and anecdotes brought smiles to the serious faces, making the time pass quickly.

At last, it was a quarter after eight and only fifteen minutes were separating them from celebrating a complete victory. Odin was sure the triumph would be his.

'There are Guardians.' Martina said looking through the window. For many hours, she'd never left her watcher's place, not caring for any frolics and refreshments.

Her announcement took them by surprise. Everyone stopped, reminding her of the silent movies. She began to laugh hysterically, until her crying sobs filled the room.

'Don't worry. They've lost. It's just to make us nervous. Don't pay any attention to them.' Odin comforted his wife, winking to Marcus, whom worried face he caught.

At last, the wall clock beat the half hour and the doorbell rang with all its strength. Odin rose and went to open.

'All of you are under arrest for treason and distribution of defamatory material.' One of the Guardians announced stepping in. The others followed him.

'You have no right to arrest us. There were no results of referendum yet. And even if they were, Mr Issel himself promised the winner will be respected.' Odin stepped forward.

'This is a mandate for your arrest. These are the results of the referendum.' The man held out his hand with papers. Odin took

them and read. Then he lifted his head and they saw his eyes were full of tears. It was a terrible view. Martina went quickly to her husband, as wanting to protect him from something horrible.

'We've lost. We've lost. Those stupid, ignorant people voted for TV and all that comes with it. I don't believe my own eyes.' Odin shouted suddenly. Martina took from him the papers and read loud the following: 'the result of vote as follows Yes – 90%, No – 10%. The State Committee congratulates the citizens, who showed the wisdom and good judgement with their choice. Let us all celebrate this day as the Judgement Day that our future generations will know of and remember the wisdom of their ancestors. Glory to our people, to our country, to our wise President, Mr Albert Issel!' The second paper was a mandate to arrest everyone who was involved in criminal activities attempting to put down the State. Martina stopped her reading and looked at everyone. Being Barbò herself, she knew better than the rest of them the tricky nature of those people. It's true they have shouted against the State and went to demonstrate for their freedom, but when it came down to choosing, she knew, Barbò will sit and think and make the choice which will be more accommodating for him alone, without caring for others in general.

'Put on your coats and follow us.' The man commanded. Up to that moment, no one said a word, but then Marcus remembered about Demetra.

'Look, my wife is ill. She's in a wheelchair. She cannot come with us. That is her nurse.' He said quickly.

'I was told to arrest everyone and bring them to the State Headquarters. She must come with the rest of you.'

'You cannot do such thing. She's an invalid.'

'If she had enough strength to be here, she has enough strength to come with us. My word is final. Don't insist. Do as you're told.'

'Marcus, I'm afraid.' Demetra cried suddenly. He ran towards her, happy to hear her voice at last.

'Your voice is back. What happiness! Don't worry. They cannot

do anything to us, anymore.' Marcus assured his wife. Nurse Nina was dressing her to get outside. He helped Demetra back into the wheelchair.

It took some time until all of them were ready to leave the house. They were about twenty all together and Demetra wondered if there was enough transport for all of them.

It was the last thing she would have to worry about. As they came out, she spotted five military vans with three red stripes on each side. The State Committee personal guard was provided for them. 'It must not be so bad.' Demetra thought.

One after the other, they entered the vans, each for four people arrested. Demetra with her nurse, Marcus and Thomas Askold were placed together, which Demetra took as a good sign.

'My dear, whatever happens to me, you must go to your parents. Your mother will take care of you. I don't think they'll let me out again.' Marcus whispered into her ear. He moved closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders. He bent and kissed her on her lips, ignoring the rest of them. He could not resist knowing it may be his last goodbye to his beautiful, smart wife whom he cared and loved even though life gave her to him for such a short time.

'It's a pity we didn't have enough time to be together. I'm treasuring each moment spent with you. Don't cry for me. Make up a new life, it's an order.' He whispered into her ear and kissed her again. Demetra was sobbing now.

'I must be with you. You're my husband, I don't want another. Don't speak nonsense.' Demetra wailed, forgetting all her manners.

'What are you doing to yourself?' Thomas interrupted them suddenly. 'I can bet my head on it, he'd prepared something different from imprisonment. Why did he let you read all those papers instead of cuffing us at once and push into plain prison vans? Did you see these vans?'

'Who knows, maybe you're right.' Nurse Nina entered their

conversation, breaking the rules of staying silent under any circumstances.

'Don't worry, I won't report on you for your behaviour.' Thomas joked at her. All four of them broke into rolling with laughter, making the Guardian who was sitting in front with the driver, to open a small window on his back and check what was going on with his prisoners.

'Don't worry, we're still here.' Marcus shouted at him and they laughed louder than before.

The vans stopped at the main entrance of the State Building, the same one where Marcus used to work. The Guardian unlocked the back door and brought down the wheelchair. The prisoners went out and were told to form a line. Demetra was the last one in her wheelchair, pushed by Nurse Nina as usual.

It was dark and still cold, although the snow was already gone. Slowly, one by one, guarded from all sides, they entered the building. Marcus was just before Demetra and often turned around to check on her, until one of the guards pushed him with the butt of his rifle. Marcus didn't react knowing it could aggravate his position.

They entered the building and proceeded between two rows of Guardians, who were placed along their route. They were leaded to the lifts three by three with the same number of guards, giving the impression of wanting to prevent their escape. Marcus took Demetra's hand and squeezed it. They exchanged glances. He knew they had to be ready for anything once their lift stopped at the twenty-sixth floor.

They were brought to the conference hall, the same one in which Mr Issel held his famous speech on fighting resistance. Marcus smiled at the tricks and irony of life.

They were told to take seats in the first row in front of a raised platform. Each prisoner was alternated with a guard to prevent then to communicate with each other. Demetra was left in her wheelchair near the wall; her nurse took the seat nearby. The

second row was filled with Guardians only. Then there were several rows behind them that were left vacant to separate the losers from the winners, the loyal and trustful associates of the State committee who filled the rest of the rows up to the end.

'At last, you are where you belong. Do you hear me, Vanderson?' Marcus recognised the insinuating voice of Miss Megan Brown. He pretended not to hear her. She was the nastiest thing he had met in his life. He sat looking straight in front of him, ignoring everyone. In opposite to her husband, Demetra turned to look at the old spinster and that was a big mistake.

'Look at me, stupid woman. Pity, they didn't try MSD on you. You wouldn't be able to move your head by now.' Miss Brown shouted at her.

'Cripple.' The other echoed her insults. It was horrible. She began to shiver and Marcus saw the nurse moving closer to her patient and covering her from that awful sight.

The raised platform was still empty. The long table was covered with a violet tablecloth and the black box of the microphone was placed at the centre of it. Everybody was waiting for the Rulers to come in. They didn't have to wait too long.

From the right side on the platform, the first to appear was Mr Albert Issel, walking quickly to the table. Robert Young followed him, and then the rest of the Committee representatives came in, each carrying a briefcase in their hand. They took their places in accordance to the protocol, the President in the centre, on his right Robert Young, on his left, the treasury Minister and so on.

Mr Issel looked at each prisoner, wearing the triumphal smile of the winner. Odin shifted his eyes away, to avoid his bitterest enemy.

'My friends! My associates! My enemies! We're brought here together due to the most extraordinary thing, which happened in our beloved country. The bunch of crooks, the thieves, the criminals, who planned to destroy our State by inventing unheard stories of some mystical device and stolen treasures and bring our

country on the brick of civil war. As our latest report says, over three hundred people died, thanks to them.' Mr Issel stopped and waved in the direction of the first row. Then he continued: 'it's not the first time over the centuries that my people are forced to fight for their rights. We did many wars and changed many things to reach the peace we have today. I swore on the grave of my beloved grandfather that I'd win any revolt that might happen in my country. This thing, which I, together with you, have faced over the last few months, was the most horrible and well organised. These conspirators were the wittiest of all by inventing non-existing equipment, just for robbing poor Barbò of their joy of living in luxury and idleness. Why do you think they did it? It's very clear why. Odin Bachter, their leader, wanted to take my place, to sit in my chair and to rule over all of you his way.' He stopped again, turning his head to the left and nodding to somebody. The next moment, one of the guards appeared carrying a glass of water on a small tray, which he placed in front of him. Mr Issel sipped some of the liquid and cleared his throat. Without glancing at anyone, he continued. 'From the start I knew I was facing a voracious and canning man. I've thought about many ways to disarm him, but nothing seemed to be good enough. I've asked for advice one of my closest associates, not Mr Young, he's not capable of anything.' At his words, Demetra noticed Robert Young winced, but kept silent. 'I took the advice from one of the ancient writing, done over six thousand years ago; I'm not going to tell you which one. I may need it in the future again. The ancient advice worked. We're all gamblers. I'm one too. However, I knew I would be the winner because I had the superior knowledge, which Odin didn't. Now, my friends, the time have come to judge these traitors. What would you suggest?' Albert Issel made his appeal to the audience. To Marcus it sounded mockingly.

At once, the conference hall became the Roman arena and the State's bureaucrats were the judges, deciding on the verdict for the losers.

'Death to them! Death!' There were shouting from everywhere. 'Life in prison! Laughing academy!' Mr Issel leaned on the back of his chair and looked satisfied into the hall. It was clear he was enjoying his victory and had played with his prisoners. Demetra sensed he had already made his decision and that scene was made up by him to scare the prisoners, who began to fear for their safety. To her own astonishment, she cared less of what was around her, but only for being again with her husband. She had to be crazy, she thought. Catching the glance of Marcus she smiled at him, putting into it all her love.

Albert Issel caught her glance too and suddenly it awoke something inside him, which he thought didn't exist anymore. He remembered himself as a young man, just married and full of love and vigour for his pretty wife. Almost at once, he had noticed she didn't care for him. All that she wanted was his power and all that came with it. It was the biggest shock for him. When she produced Liz who became Barbò, she brought an eternal shame on him. He didn't dare to have more children from the fear of them being Barbò. For all those months Rebora was telling him to inflict a severe punishment on the traitors, making it as an exemplary case for the future. As long as someone will remember it, one's entire wish for revolt will disappear.

Glancing at Demetra again, Albert thought, how could he punish a girl whom he saw growing up into a beautiful woman, who was taken away from her beloved newlywed husband, after just a few days spent in his bed and who was tortured by that bulky bastard for nothing. All of the sudden, Albert Issel decided to make his decision diametrically opposite to his wife's advices and Robert's. Who knows, maybe his wife is Robert's lover? He didn't seem of being in rush to remarry. Albert Issel raised his arm and the hall was silent.

'I agree with you that those traitors deserved death and only death. But I thought that death for such people would be just freedom from our World, which they wanted to destroy.'

The conference hall was shaking from the roaring sounds of loyalists. 'Death to the traitors! Burn them on the stake! Blind them! Death! Death! 'The screams were reaching Demetra from all sides. The poor thing was shaking like a leaf having experienced the cruelty of those people. As a cornered animal, she glanced quickly around as looking for escape but instead of it, she met the black eyes of Robert Young, who was laughing loudly, enjoying each moment of his victory. At last, Mr Issel raised his hand and the next moment, a deep silence fell in the hall again. Everybody was anxious to hear his verdict.

'My loyal friends! I want to thank you for your trust in my leadership and me. I'm not going to disappoint you. These people deserve to be hanged and I'll be the first to provide the rope for it. However, let us not rush today. I know you think the same as me. I'm going to think on what type of punishment will be the best for them. Tomorrow I'll let you know my decision. I promise you, I'm not going to disappoint you. Thank you again.' Smiling at the hall, the President rose from his seat. Under the roaring applauds of his supporters, he collected his papers from the table and slowly walked to the exit. The audience was exhilarated.

They were taken away in the same van, to the Guardian's Headquarters, Demetra thought. The same as she was taken before. There were the temporary cells for prisoners who didn't get their final destination yet.

'My dear, I don't think they'll allow me to take care of you there. They have their own nurses, I guess.' Nurse Nina whispered into Demetra's ear.

'I'm all right now. I can manage many things by myself.' She assured the worrying nurse.

'They must let you free.' Marcus stated, knowing well the cruelty of their guards.

At last, the van stopped and after a sound of scratching metal, the back doors opened wide and a guardian was waiting for them. Silently, the four of them got out from the vehicle and went to the

building. Nurse Nina was sent back to her home, since she had nothing to do with the Underground Movement.

'You'll spend this night here. Tomorrow, when the final verdict will be known, you'll be treated by the protocol. Today you're lucky.' The man in charge told them. Then he turned to one of his assistants: 'Take them to section B and place them all together into the cell number 27.'

Despite of being in prison, Demetra was contented to spend the night with her husband, no matter where. She caught his eyes and smiled to him.

'Wow, you're still smiling, girl. You must be a tough one if the death penalty didn't disturb you.' The officer exclaimed, catching her expression as well.

Chapter 25

First time in his life, Mr Issel was experiencing the feeling of absolute happiness. If somebody could ask him to explain his feelings, he would not be able to find the right words. His victory over the Underground Movement was so complete that it brought him to the bliss that he enjoyed in full. He was impatient to thank his superiors for their advice that brought him that victory.

As soon as he entered the house, he went directly to the library and carefully locked the door behind him. Continuing to whistle, he got his golden key from the back of his pocket watch and went directly to the bookshelves. Shifting some books aside, Mr Issel put his key into the keyhole and turned it. The door opened swiftly. As usual, he turned automatically his head to look behind him, laughing at his foolishness at the same time; the library door was locked. Then he stretched his hand into the safety box and instantly all his body was covered with thick cold sweat: the safety box was empty. 'There is no reason to panic. It's here.' He tried to calm himself down and again he checked into the box. It was empty. The papers had disappeared.

All of the sudden, he felt his hair rising on the back of his head and the goose skin running down his spine. His legs could not hold his body anymore and he slid on the floor. Frantically, he was trying to remember everything he had done since the last time he had used the box, and was sure he had never left his pocket watch unattended. He was too confused to analyse or think about anything except the loss of those precious papers. As hypnotized, he just stared at the black hole of the box opening.

'Ah, you're here at last.' He heard the familiar voice behind his back but he had no strength to face its owner, his daughter Liz.

'Well, well, what's going on here? Did you lose something, my

dear father? I guess you did. And I know what.' She mocked him cruelly.

Stupefied, he looked in front of him unable to neither see her nor reply. 'What are you doing here?' The question ran in his head but he seemed to lose his ability to speak.

'I can see you've lost your tongue. Or maybe your brain?' Liz laughed at him. After a while, Mr Issel began to recover from the shock. Slowly he turned to face his daughter.

'What are you doing here?' He asked still not looking at her.

'I wanted to speak with you. I came before you and waited for you behind your luxury damask floor-length draperies, which you so love to admire.' Liz jeered at him, with a voice that Albert hated so much.

'Damn you! You stole my papers! Why? How did you manage to do that? You, the thief!' He began to shout at her.

'It was a schoolgirl's job. Where did you think I was taught these tricks such as ear dropping, stealing, and cheating? They were the usual methods of survival in your famous Statedoms. From this point, I'm glad of growing up there. Those formidable institutions are the best thing to teach anybody how to survive and be successful.' Liz triumphed.

'Give me back those papers at once. You don't know anything about life. Without those papers, we're all finished. Give it to me.' Albert had recovered enough to begin to see the size of the problem he was facing.

'Oh, no, my dear father. I've other plans for you and for those papers. I knew you were playing some dirty game, but I didn't know what. Now I know what it was and I've decided to play it myself.' Liz retorted.

'You don't know what you're talking about. Don't mix up with things that are not for you. You're Barbò.' He insisted.

'I'm not. Listen to me, I'm not Barbò. I've pretended to be one because I didn't want to work. Ever since I was a little girl and was still at home, I saw the life led by my mother, and I didn't want

such life for myself. Everybody treated me as a baby but at six I was smart enough to understand what I wanted to do.'

'I don't believe you. There are no ways for a child of six to decide what she wants.'

'You're right about that. I didn't decide at six. I've decided at ten. Do you remember that time, when I was getting excellent marks for my homework? When I was told I would have been sent to the school for Stakhanò, I revolted against it. I already knew, being a Stakhanò meant I had to work hard for the rest of my life. I didn't care for it. I didn't care for being Stakhanò either. All that I wanted was to have your job, to be in charge of the State. I knew I was capable of doing it.'

'You're crazy. You're drunker and more drug addict than I thought and everyone knows you as such.' He refused to listen to her. However, eventually he began to comprehend her words, and their meaning terrified him more than the loss of the papers. At last, its full meaning came down on him.

'Were you plotting to take my place?' He asked slowly, not believing to his ears.

'Indeed. I've waited for my chance for many years, watching each of your movements. I've studied all your speeches, notes, and your way to dress and conduct. I didn't know where to start, but being your daughter, I've found my way at last.' Liz laughed loudly at him.

'You're dirty bitch.' He cursed at her, boiling from inside. He wanted to kill her.

'It looks like no one is immune against foil language. Continue, I'm listening.' She taunted him.

Albert kept quiet. He had had enough of her and decided to ignore her presence. He recovered his strength enough and began to rise on his feet.

'Let me help you, papa.' Liz took him by the arm but he shook her hand off.

'Don't touch me.' He spat angrily.

'As you want.' She shrugged her shoulders.

Mr Issel reached his armchair and heavily plonked down into it. He put both of his hands on the top of his desk. He noticed they were shaking. Unhurriedly, he put his hands to rest on his knees, hoping Liz didn't notice them. He leaned on the back of his armchair and closed his eyes. He needed time to absorb the happenings and decide what he should have done next. It was a joke to find him at the top of happiness one moment and fall down into the ravine the next.

The worst thing of all was that Liz was right, saying to him that who had the papers was the boss. He could not figure out how she succeeded to get to the bottom of the truth, but anyway she did. His father always reminded him to keep those papers as the apple of his eye. Albert did what he could. Whenever he needed to get to the papers, he locked the door with the key and the gold key was in his pocket watch, which it was always on him. Well, it looked like his daughter managed to get those papers somehow. For sure, she had read what was written there. It was stated clear enough: 'Anyone in possession of these papers report to the centre in twenty four hours to be cleared for the position of the President of Karsland.' Signed by the Spider Group. Easy as it was.

He knew he had lost, but his brain was still refusing to accept the truth. It was happening all too fast. Albert still had some hopes. He could not accept his fall so easily. There had to be something to do in order to correct that matter. There was no way that that girl, Barbò, will be sitting in his armchair and dictating to him her rules and regulations.

'You cannot be accepted as my replacement. You're a woman and a young one. No one will take you seriously.' He stated harshly.

'They already did. I've sent them an email last night, telling them I'm your daughter and from now on, I'm in charge. You're too old to handle the State's matters. This is why we've got into trouble. Their reply arrived today while you were in the State

Headquarters, enjoying your triumph.' Liz said slowly, almost as pitying her father. Then she began again. 'Father, we don't have too much time. You've already recovered as I can see. There are some matters which must be urgently solved.' He heard Liz' voice, but continued to stay still.

'Open your eyes. You're not in danger of life or else. You're all right, so try to be reasonable. Please. I have a proposition for you.' Then Mr Issel opened his eyes to see Liz in front of him, sat on one of the visitor's chairs. He looked at her and didn't believe his own eyes. In front of him was a completely different Liz, not the one he was used to see. It was a thin, blonde young woman; lady-like dressed in black, without any jewellery. Her appearance was so altered he found it difficult to speak. He just looked at her.

'Don't look at me like I'm a ghost.' She was irritated by his reaction.

'What's happened to you? You don't look like yourself.' He wondered.

'Nothing. I am myself now. My masquerade is over. I don't need it now. I've got what I want.' She replied, reminding him about his loss.

'Indeed, you are. I was right in the end, not trusting you. I've always felt that one day you'd betray me and all our family.'

'Not at all. I'll be your salvation. You're an old man and no longer able to handle the State, otherwise you wouldn't have made a fool of yourself. You have that bull of yours, Robert, who is the last person for running the State Security. You should have known about his cruelty and stupidity. Maybe he's good for his studies, but not for politics. You must send him to work using his brains. Let him do some research on the future of our State or something else and never have him near the State Building. This was the second point to solve.' Liz stated.

'And the first one?' Issel asked in a mocking voice.

'Don't make fun of me. The first one, to solve the problem of our Underground members.'

'Oh, not. You're not going to tell me what to do with those people.' He protested.

'Oh, yes, I am. I already have got some plans for them.'

'Have you? I'm curious to hear them.' He laughed at her openly.

'Watch yourself. I'm the boss, remember it.' She cut him short and continued. 'Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock you'll assemble your people and prisoners in the conference hall as today and read your verdict which I've prepared for you.' Liz commanded peremptory.

'I'll never do such thing.' He refused categorically her demand.

'We'll see about that.' Liz said, rising from her chair. She went to the bookshelves, locked the safety box and took the gold key out from the keyhole. She turned and went to her father, who was watching her silently.

'Take it. I guess you may use this hiding place again for your own thing. I don't need it.' She placed the key on top of the desk. 'I'm going to my room now. When you're ready for me, call me anytime. No matter when. It's half passed eleven. You have more than sufficient time to prepare yourself for the morning.' Liz stated harshly and turned to the door. He heard her turning the key.

'See you soon.' She greeted him and left.

'You'll never, ever be my boss!' He screamed back to her but the door was already shut behind her.

* * *

It was the worst night of her life, Demetra decided, after spending hours in her wheelchair. However, she was lucky since the cell was empty of everything and the rest of them sat on the floor, which was heated from the bottom. It was the most uncomfortable and unpleasant experience, she knew from her previous arrest. Marcus was near her, holding her hand.

'Don't worry. We'll be alright, I can feel it.' Demetra comforted him suddenly. In her mind she could not admit their defeat yet, thinking it was a matter of time to recount votes and realise they

were the real winners. It was unheard for someone to refuse voluntarily the chance of becoming free and independent. Marcus was silent being devastated by all that happened to them.

'It's all made-up. That son-of-the-b..., ladies, forgive my language, cheated all of us. I'm sure he did. He could never resign from his post. Did you notice, no one mentioned the treasure that you've found in Lapland Cave? I'll never give up on my revenge. I swear I'll never do.' Odin cried like a mad man.

'Listen to me. Let's forget about that referendum for today. Relax. Try to sleep. Tomorrow we don't know what will happen to us. Please, Odin, forget about everything.' Martina tried to calm him down.

'I don't need your advices. Shut up. I must find a way to change this country.' Odin was shouting now.

'You, there. Keep quiet or I'll move you to a single cell,' the guard warned him from somewhere.

'I've told you to be quiet. Otherwise, they'll take you away. Please, do it for me.' Martina pleaded with her husband.

'I am again in hell,' Demetra thought remembering it was her second time in prison since her marriage. She squeezed slightly her husband's fingers, to assure her she was not alone. After a while, she dozed into a restless slumber.

'Wake up, Demetra.' Marcus shook her briskly. She opened her eyes and seeing her husband in front of her, smiled happily. Then she glanced around and remembered where they were, its expression changed to a desperate one.

'We must go out. The guardian said we'd be moved to another place now. He didn't say where to.' Marcus explained.

'What's the time now?' Demetra asked.

'It's six o'clock. Too early for breakfast and too late for an execution.' Marcus joked. Thomas laughed loudly.

'How about a cup of tea?' Odin said sarcastically looking directly at the guard.

'It's not meal time yet.' The man replied unperturbed.

They left the cell one after the other, each dwelling on their own thoughts.

When they stepped out into the dark, Demetra began to tremble from the cold; but she didn't complain, not wanting to worry Marcus for nothing. He pushed her wheelchair, contented he could see her at least.

The same vans from the previous night were there at the entrance of the Guardians Headquarters. Resigned on their future, the prisoners boarded vehicles silently.

To their ultimate astonishment, they were brought to the State Building and up to the conference hall.

'You can go to the bathrooms now. The tea will be served shortly.' One of the Guardians announced, leaving all of them speechless. Martina was the first who came back to her senses. She went to Demetra.

'Let me wheel you to the bathroom. I guess you need to refresh yourself the same as I do,' she said standing behind her wheelchair and added to Marcus: 'don't worry; I'll take care of her.'

In half hour time they were all back into the hall, taking their seats on the first row as on the previous night. A hot, sweet tea along with some cakes was brought to them. Demetra drank it slowly, savouring its aroma. She, as the rest of them, didn't have anything to eat since the previous afternoon. The Rulers didn't care to order some food for the losers. It was a big relief to feel again like a human being. She looked around, noticing the Guardians grouped at quite a distance from the prisoners and were not paying any attention to them. Such strange attitude could not have passed unnoticed from the others, Demetra thought. She wished to exchange her observations with Marcus, but he was far from her. Martina took the place nearby, in case of need, but Demetra didn't dare to speak to her, knowing Odin's position was the worst of them all.

Quarter to eight some of the State's supporters came in. Demetra was near the wall as the day before and she had an excellent view of the newcomers. She noticed the most of them seemed of being

surprised, as for the rest they looked of being annoyed or irritated. One thing for sure, no one was contented to be there so early.

At eight o'clock, the conference hall was filled with people, sitting and waiting silently for the Rulers' next move, Demetra thought. The raised platform was still empty.

After a while Demetra was one of the first who saw Mr Albert Issel, the President, entering it from the right. He walked straight carrying his head high and proud, with an arrogant expression on his face, not looking at anybody and reaching his place at the centre of the table, he set there. Retrieving some papers from his briefcase, he glanced through them quickly as taking his time in the waiting for others. He didn't look like a winner today, Demetra thought, but didn't share her opinion with Martina. She glanced at Marcus and noticed he was looking at Mr Issel with some strange expression.

Once all members of the State Committee were present, Albert Issel rose his hand demanding for silence, even the hall was soundless ever since his appearance: everybody was eager to hear his final verdict.

'My friends. My associates. It took me all night to decide what to do with these people.' He pointed his finger in the direction of Odin and his group.

All of the sudden, he put down his papers removed his glasses and slowly massaged his forehead. Then he raised his head again and Demetra was taken aback by his expression. In front of her, she saw just a small old man, who looked like beaten up and having lost his battle.

'They will be punished as I've decided.' He cleared his throat and said in a tired, disillusioned voice. 'I must disappoint you: there will be no Roman amphitheatre spectacle, no American death penalty execution, no Soviet labour camps, since we cannot recreate those just for a few criminals. They'll be punished by our, Karslander's law. Each of them will have two choices: to go on exile for the rest of their life or to stay here as Barbò until

their death. They'll have twenty four hours to make their choice.' As soon as Mr Issel finished his speech, he rose from the chair and walked out, taking with him all his papers. All members of the State Committee rushed after him as running from the battlefield, Demetra thought.

They did the right thing, since the moment Mr Issel disappeared from sight; the roaring screams of supporters shook up the hall. They shouted in a foul language, addressing both the losers and the Rulers, demanding the death penalty for traitors. There was no one to hear them. The platform was empty. Little by little, their shouting lessened until a complete silence fell in the hall. The state sympathisers realised there was no one to hear them or do something. The President was the absolute power in Karsland and his judgement was final.

Soon after that, everybody left the hall but of the ex-prisoners and a few guards. No one moved or looked at each other being stunned by the verdict. Slowly, someone rose and moved closer to Odin who continued to sit and look down at the floor. Marcus stood behind Demetra's wheelchair, ready to go home. He didn't want to think about anything anymore, but of being with his wife and that day, for sure, in his own bed.

'Let's go home. Now. Please.' Demetra pleaded with him, wanting to be out from that dreadful place as quickly as possible. Everything here reminded her of the time spent in prison and her illness.

'Demetra is tired. I don't see the point to stay here. We're leaving. I'll see you tomorrow.' Marcus said looking at Odin.

'See you then.' Odin replied absent-minded.

'Do you need my help? I'm going home too.' Thomas asked nearing to them.

'Actually, I was wondering how to reach our home. We've been brought by the State and I think the State should bring us back to our homes. Or at least, to Odin's, where my car is parked.' Marcus said loud without addressing anyone in particular.

'We're told to bring all of you to Odin's house when you're ready to move.' One of the guards answered to Marcus.

'In this case, we're ready.' Marcus said pushing Demetra's wheelchair to the exit.

* * *

'I'm so hungry I could eat you up.' Marcus joked entering the sitting room at last.

'It's so nice to be at home again.' Demetra uttered.

'To be at home together and alone at last. I've missed you so much.' He walked around her wheelchair and stopped in front of her. Putting his hands under her armpits, he pulled her up.

'I can do by myself.' She resisted standing now at her full height. They hugged feeling the warmth of each other.

'I'll carry you to our bed.' He whispered filling his desire beginning to take over him. She put her arms around his neck and he lifted her in his arms easily.

'What's going on here? I cannot even get some sleep after a night shift. Where is the nurse?' Alexis appeared in the room dressed in his house robe. He looked as he just got out of the bed. Both of them completely forgot about Alexis.

'What are you doing here?' Marcus asked his brother unceremoniously.

'What do you mean? I'm living here with the both of you. I was sleeping before you woke me up.' He was annoyed.

'Do you know what day is today?'

'The second of April, I've dated all my forms in the hospital. What has the day to do with you?'

'Do you remember about the referendum?'

'Why should I? I didn't care for voting. It's a matter for Barbò.' Alexis stated, wondering what's wrong with those two. Marcus didn't reply.

'By the way where is the nurse? Demetra is not well enough to be without one.' Alexis sounded like a doctor again.

'Why don't you ask us where did we spend last night? You didn't miss us, did you?' It was Marcus's turn to get angry.

'Where did you spend last night?' Alexis repeated, not understanding why his older brother was getting mad at him.

'In prison.'

'In prison? Why?' Alexis plonked into the nearest armchair, looking shocked by their words. It was clear he had missed the events of the previous night and knew nothing about them. Marcus placed Demetra back on her wheelchair and sat on the sofa. In a few words, he updated Alexis on all the events of the previous day.

'And now? Are you ready to spend your life as Barbò?' Alexis asked overwhelmed by their news.

'We still have time to make our choice.' Marcus glanced at his wristwatch mockingly. Then he said seriously: 'We're talking life changing decision. We cannot rush on it. Let us take our time and we'll tell you later on, I guess, during dinnertime, our final decision.'

'In this case, I'm going back to my bed. I'll sleep up to six. Don't wake me up, I'll set an alarm.' Alexis said and rose from his seat. He disappeared from their sight, the same sudden way as he had appeared.

'He made no remarks. I guess he realised how cautious is our situation, unless he's too tired to think about anything except his bed.' Demetra remarked.

'I don't care about his comments when I have my wife next to me.' Marcus said suddenly picking up her into his arms. 'I'm ready for my bed too. And my wife also.' He kissed Demetra lightly on her cheek and carried her to their bedroom with wide strides. At last, he was holding his bride in his arms again and swore to himself to never let her out of his sight, never again to leave her alone.

PART TWO

Exile

Chapter 26

The plane landed in the dark of the night. Demetra glanced at her wristwatch. It was five forty-five in Karsland time and three thirty in Greenwich Time. At last, they were in England. Marcus was still asleep but she didn't wake him up. Not yet.

They were on the military plane, which carried them to the exile under the order of the State Committee. They were the only two who got enough courage to leave Karsland for good. Marcus would never agree to live the life as a Barbò. He had lived abroad long enough to know their ways of life and felt secure he could survive there. Demetra followed him, putting her life into his hands. Besides, she didn't have another choice. She still needed time to recover after her detention and for sure there was no way she'd be reduced to Barbò's life.

Marcus let her choose the country she liked. She pondered over the map of Europe for a long time, picking up England in the end. She didn't expect any difficulties in adapting to her new country; English language was her mother tongue. She had been determined to make a success of her future life there and hoped to call it very soon her new homeland. Brushing those tiresome thoughts aside, she looked in front of her.

There were only eight passenger seats behind the pilot's cabin. The first six seats were occupied by foreigners, as Demetra labelled them, judging by their clothes. There was no way to identify the country of their provenance, since none of them said a word during the entire flight. She was intrigued by such strange behaviour, wondering why those men had kept silent.

Their conservative dark clothes and flat dark attaché-cases bespoke of business connection. Unsmiling, clean-shaved faces with long slightly crooked noses and close-set eyes made

her think they were all brothers who were on their return trip. She wondered why they chose to fly on that clumsy, uncomfortable military plane, instead of an elegant, luxury passenger one. Marcus could know, she thought turning to the window.

The sky was black, covered with multiple stars reminding her of Karsland. As far as she could see there was open countryside. Faraway, she glimpsed a sea of lights. It must be the city, she thought; the airport was close to London.

'Are you alright?' She heard her husband's voice.

'Oh, you're up already.' She turned to face him.

'What's going on?'

'We've landed some minutes ago. You were sleeping and I didn't want to wake you up.' She smiled at him.

'It takes a while to get out of here. Last time we've been sitting on the ground for almost two hours before authorities arrived. Have patience.' He took her hand and squeezed it lightly.

'I'm alright. None of these moved a muscle. They're marble statues.' Demetra shifted her eyes in the direction of the other passengers. Marcus lifted his eyebrows and moved his head in gesture, telling her to keep quiet.

The scratchy, metallic sound of something being in motion got her attention. She bent to her right and turned her head to see a huge back door rising up slowly, in the rear of plane. The cool fresh air entered inside. In the dim light of ground illumination she spotted two small vans parked nearby.

At last, the door was fully opened. Several men entered the plane and quickly walked towards the pilot's pit. One of them, tall, in a long black leather overcoat, the flat leather cap wore tightly on his head, stopped near them. For a few moments he seemed to study Demetra, and then he said in a low inquiring voice:

'You are the Vandersons, aren't you?' Marcus lifted his head and met the cold grey eyes.

'Yes, we are.' He confirmed calmly.

'Your passports, please.' Without rush, Marcus retrieved their

documents from his inner coat pocket and gave them to the man.

'Thanks.' The officer opened their passports, one after the other; each time carefully compared the photo with its original. The procedure went in silence. Demetra, being abroad for the first time, was not used to border control and especially under such special circumstances as those. She had been stunned by the formidable behaviour of the man so much that for a while she just sat there and looked in front of her, waiting, not knowing what to do. It was really her luck. The officer studying her decided she was too timid and dull. After a while, he smiled at them; his face reflected some kind of satisfaction or maybe approval, Demetra could not figure out.

'I'll keep your passports,' he said and then added: 'Take all your belongings. Follow me. We'll escort you to your flat.' Marcus rose from his seat.

'We must move. Take your things.' He said to Demetra who continued to sit as if not hearing his words. He took her by the hand and slightly pulled her up.

'We must go.' He repeated. At last, his words reached her. Slowly she rose and picked up her fur coat.

'Your bag?' Marcus reminded her. She nodded.

'Follow me.' He leaded the way.

'Your luggage is in the car.' The man answered her question, openly written on her face.

Demetra noticed the other passengers were still on their seats and seemed of waiting for them to leave first. They were still motionless but of one, whom she observed during the flight, who had a muscle twitching on his left cheek, which she was able to see clearly from her seat. It was something new for her; she had never met anyone having such thing in Karsland.

They reached a small four-wheel drive, black van, with black leather interiors. All three of them sat on the back seats. The driver and the other man were already on the front seats. Deme-

tra noticed all officers wore the same kind of coats and caps. It must be some kind of uniform, she figured out.

As soon as they were in the vehicle, the driver started the engine. Demetra turned to Marcus to ask about their luggage, but it was not necessary; she spotted it in the space behind their seats. At least I still have my trousseau, she thought, jolting against her seat as the van moved suddenly.

They started at high speed and with the ear-splitting siren on. At the sound of the siren, Demetra shuddered and looked quickly at their escort, who behaved as nothing happened at all. He looked at them as saying: 'My job is to deliver you to your flat.' Demetra slightly shivered, remembering suddenly the days spent in prison. Too many things happened too fast and she needed time to absorb it all. But there was no time. A new life was in front of her and she needed all her strength to adapt to it.

'Look, there.' She heard her husband's whisper and turned her head but nothing could be seen. They were on the elevated highway, wide, with wide shoulder similar to Karsland's. It ran above strange small houses, placed uniformly along narrow, dark streets. Each dwelling had several strange chimneys and patches of green in front of it. Immediately she knew it was a residential area, which she saw in the old movies made several hundred years before; for sure she would not have expected to see those antiques on that day.

'Are they…' She stopped in the middle of her sentence. She didn't want to make some remarks, which could be offensive to their escort. Some of them may live in one of those houses. Poor Demetra, she could not imagine that it was one of the best residential areas in London.

I wonder if it's a Barbò area, she thought, and then laughed loudly at her own thoughts. There were no Barbò, no Stakhanò there. It was the land of equity and freedom; democracy was ruling there, despite of being a parliamentary monarchy. Marcus pushed her gently with his elbow, warning to check her be-

haviour. Quickly she suppressed her smirk and glanced at the rear view mirror, meeting the driver's eyes. His face resembled a stone mask: unsmiling, unfriendly and unmerciful. She felt his hostility and wondered what she had done wrong to get such reaction. They continued their ride in silence.

Demetra looked on both sides, but there was nothing special to attract her attention. The highway was empty but of few cars which ran at the same high speed as theirs. She wondered why the siren was on, but didn't dare to ask. Something told her to be silent and patient. Glancing at Marcus, she noticed his face had a hard expression, similar to the driver's. She wondered why, but kept quiet. Suddenly, she shivered from the cold and to warm herself she pulled her fur coat tighter to her body. Someone walked over my grave, she remembered the saying. The soft fur calmed her gradually and her only wish was that their ride would be over as soon as possible.

As answering to her silent prayer, the driver moved to the left line and soon after they quitted the highway. Left turn? Then she remembered England was the only country to keep stubbornly Roman tradition - left-handed traffic. For sometime in the past, there was a talk to change to right-hand driving, but the pressure of interest groups persisted in keeping England the only country in the World with left-hand traffic. A unique country, they professed it as such.

The car continued to run on dim-lighted streets, making Demetra to wonder if such poor streets illumination was due to some technical fault, or if it was a normal thing there. After several turns, the vehicle stopped at last. The man on the front seat quickly stepped out. She saw him mounting the stairs. Then Marcus blocked her view by turning to her: 'My dear, we're home at last.' His words sounded incongruous, in the darkness of their surroundings.

'You can come out now.' The man was back. Their escort opened the door and stepped out, followed by Marcus. Demetra was the

last to leave the car. She stopped momentarily to orient herself. She was in front of an impressive tall, white building with marble steps, leading to an imposing entrance.

A doorman in uniform held the massive high-polished door open. His face was sober, unreadable. He looked straightforward, as a sentinel on the State's monument from back home, Demetra thought. The uniformed men carried their luggage into the building.

'Let's move.' Marcus took her by the elbow, guiding her to the entrance.

The lobby was splendid, with its mirrored walls and a huge crystal chandelier hanging from the high ceiling and brightly illuminating the area. A short flight of stairs led them to lifts.

'Wait here, please.' They were shown to a coach, which ran on the length of one of the walls, opposite of the porter's desk. They sat and watched silently, while two men brought one by one their suitcases, hatboxes, zippered canvass bags, cooling boxes and so on into a huge cart and then rolled it away. In a few minutes they were back with the empty cart. Picking up the rest of the luggage and turning to Marcus they said: 'Come with us now.' It sounded almost as a command.

Demetra glanced at Marcus, who smiled to her reassuringly. They rose. She shook her fur coat, grimacing to her image in the big mirror and turned to her husband. He took her by the waist and directed her to the stairs.

'I'm not going to runaway, my dear,' she whispered to him cheerfully, pretending to be happy and she was embracing him as he did. They moved to the lift. The ride was shockingly short; it stopped on the first floor. They stepped out into a long narrow corridor.

'This way.' The man standing near one of the doors in the middle of the corridor called them. They went towards him. Marcus was the first to enter the flat. Demetra followed.

'Ah.' She was shocked by the size of the hall; it was hardly one square meter.

On adjoining two sides were doors wide opened, each leading to the room. One led to the sitting room and the other to the bedroom. Both rooms were of the same size and each had a door at the other end of it. It was not difficult to figure out that the door of the bedroom lead to the bathroom, while the door of the sitting room to the kitchen.

Demetra stepped into the sitting room. All the space was filled with their luggage. She looked around, wondering how was possible it to make a comfortable life in such a small space. Then she noticed the narrow passage left to reach the sofa. How thoughtful of them, she thought sarcastically. The man, who stood next to Marcus near French windows, silently watching her, certainly did catch her perplexed expression.

'Well, my job is over. I've delivered you to your flat. Now you're on your own. 'He said briskly. 'We'll keep your passports. Just one small thing.' He went to his inner pocket and removed a thick brown envelope. 'It's for you. I was told to give it to you at the last moment.' He held it to Marcus, who took it without any questions, guessing what was there.

'Good luck!' With wide strides the man went to the main door. Passing by Demetra, he smiled to her reassuringly and left.

'I wonder what the meaning of his grin is.' Marcus said going to the hall. He locked the door with all locks, there were three of those. Then he returned in the room, standing near Demetra, who seemed to be lost between their luggages. She was so dismayed by their surroundings, that all that she could do was just staring at what was in front of her.

The room was beautifully decorated in soft grey and blue tones. The heavy draperies matched the upholstery of the sofa and the rest of the room. The mirror, in a heavy gold gilded frame of Imperial style, took one wall and two others were taken by various paintings. But the artful decoration could not hide the main handicap of the room – its size. By her rough estimation it had to be no more than twenty square meters.

She was not been impressed at all by their 'en suite' which, as Marcus told her, was by London and Chelsea standards, one of the best apartments for rent which they could get for a reasonable price (she would find out later that their reasonable price was equal to one month of pay of a clerk).

'Don't be let down by this lousy room, my beautiful. It's only for a short time.' Marcus comforted her. She guessed her face had betrayed her disappointment.

'I'll be all right.' She assured him quickly. The last thing she wanted was to make Marcus upset. Quickly, she dropped her handbag on the floor, took off her fur coat and kicked off her high-heeled shoes. In stockings, she walked to the sofa and sat on it, feeling its soft comfort.

'Let's hope our plans will come true.' She smiled at him, deciding to hide her disappointment.

'Come here. Sit next to me. Let's see what's in there.' She urged her husband to join her. He didn't need a second invitation. As soon as he took his seat next to her, Marcus got his small knife from his pocket and carefully opened the brown envelope. He looked into it.

'Well, well, the State Committee got generous to us in the end.' He remarked, emptying its contents on the table. Demetra saw paper money packed in several thick packs, some other papers, documents and a letter written on thick cream patch paper with the familiar Karsland logo on it.

'Read it. I'm curious to know what's there.' Demetra prompted him.

'*Dear Sir and Madam*,' Marcus began and stopped suddenly. 'Let's be on safe side. Let me read it. Then you'll read it too.' He signed her in the sign language. Demetra agreed wondering, if he had got pathological after Karsland events, or if his precaution was sensible.

'*Dear Sir and Madam, We have opened a current account for you at the Royal Bank with a hundred thousand pounds. These*

additional ten thousand pounds are a present for you from Liz. Good luck!' Signed Robert Young.

Demetra finished the reading and lifted her eyes. Marcus was looking at her questionably. She shrugged her shoulders and signed to him about not knowing the value of money, so she could not figure out if it was a fortune or not. She picked up on random one of the two passports, new and crispy at touch, and opened it. It was for Marcus. She put it down and took the other. It was hers. A British passport with her name, her identity and British citizenship. She lifted her eyes to Marcus. He half-smiled at her.

'Our friend's doing. They could not have done such thing, unless they're in charge of this World.' He remarked in the sign language.

All of the sudden, she felt of being fed up with everything and too tired to care about anything. Her head began to throb again, reminding her that she still had not fully recovered from her illness.

'I am too tired to think about anything,' she whispered.

'You're right. Let's go to bed.' Marcus agreed, sweeping carelessly everything from the table back into the envelope. He rose, pulling her up with one hand and holding her tightly to his side, they went to the bedroom to get some sleep after their tiresome trip.

Chapter 27

Demetra woke up feeling rested. Without opening her eyes, she slowly moved her arm, reaching for her husband. Her fingers touched the empty space. Quickly, she opened her eyes and began to turn on her right side, but a heavy pain in her spine prevented any further movement. Not again, she exhaled heavily, remembering her illness. She was all right for the past two weeks, but it seemed like the stress of packing, the departure and the trip itself had an impact on her. Tears filled her eyes, but she suppressed them. She wanted to be strong and she was determined to adapt to the new life. She closed her eyes again, wondering what time it was and where Marcus had gone.

The room was full of noise, coming from outside. There were familiar sounds of car tires on the asphalt, birds singing, people's voices and some others that were new to her. Sharp, short ear-splitting sounds, which she guessed could have been of car horns and loud screams of something falling down, some kind of commotion, or something else which she could not identify.

'I wonder where he's gone. Well, I've no other choice but to wait till he'll be back,' she thought, trying not to think about her pain and incapability to do anything.

She laid flat on her back, looking at the ceiling and hating herself for being so helpless.

The persistent thought about being lost in that unknown world, returned to her mind, making her to regret the departure from her homeland. She remembered everybody and everything that they had left behind: her parents, her friends, her job, and her house, everything she loved and cared. In the end, only two of them had left Karsland.

'He put a spell on me,' she thought, feeling miserable. But she

knew it had nothing to do with him. It was she who didn't want to stay there either and wanted to follow her husband, wherever he would go. She didn't know for how long she was laying; she dozed at the end. The sound of the turning key in the lock awoke her.

'Demetra!' It was Marcus.

'I'm in bed.' She yelled but didn't dare to move, minding the pain.

'You're still in bed. It's almost noon. I already went to the bank, and then got some food for us. It's a nice day out there. Sunny, too. It's a good sign for us to start a new life. Stand up, quickly.' He reached the bed, walked around and met her eyes.

'Are you alright?' His voice now sounded worried, after noticing the same expression she had had when she was not well.

'I don't know. I cannot move. The pain in my spine is unbearable.' She murmured terrified on being ill in a new country.

'How about your medicine? Don't forget we've brought tons of it and they're good here as they are there.' Marcus tried to reassure her.

'Do you remember where all our medicine is?' He asked her.

'In the red cool box. Bring it to me and we'll see.' Quickly, he went to retrieve the needed.

In no time the cool box was installed on the chair and opened immediately. The list of its contents was attached to the lid. Marcus began to read slowly: '*Alentin*, *Abustin*, and *Arcemazin*.'

'That's it.' Demetra interrupted him. '*Arcemazin* is a spine painkiller. Get two capsules, please.' Marcus did. Then he went out and returned with a glass of water.

'Help me with the glass, please. I don't want to splash it on the bed.'

'Don't worry about it. Take it.' Demetra held her hand to him. He put two capsules into her palm. Slowly, she swallowed each capsule separately with water, Marcus holding it for her.

'Rest now. Call if you need anything.' He said and left the room.

In moments like that she hated herself for being weak and ill,

but remembering it was not her fault, all her anger was transferred on the State Committee and its loyal servants. Thanks to those, she was an invalid now.

After a while her pain lessened and at last disappeared. She rose slowly in the sitting position. The sound of something moving came from the other room.

'What are you doing there?' She called him. 'Wait for me. Don't try to arrange anything without me.'

'Don't worry. Take your time to rest.' She heard his calm voice.

The sound of shifting heavy things and opening zippers told her he was attacking the luggage. Slowly, she rose from her bed. Looking around for her dressing gown and remembering it was in her suitcase, she dragged herself as she was, in pyjamas, to the sitting room.

'What's going on here?' She muttered at the sight of complete disorder. She stepped forward, but unexpected dizziness made her to drab at the doorframe to keep her balance.

'Why…' she began seeing many suitcases, boxes, and bags were opened and a lot of clothing was thrown carelessly on the carpet, but stopped in time noting her own luggage being intact.

'I've looked for a few things I needed.' Marcus smiled at her. 'I hope you don't mind. Ah, I forgot about it.' He ran to the kitchen. The smell of the coffee told her he had prepared it for her. She felt ashamed of being so ill-considered. She was ready to make a scandal to him for nothing. She felt guilty of being so selfish and egotistic, when he was always so good to her. A guilty blush covered her face.

'I'll help you,' she called to him. Dodging between the various bags, she reached the kitchen door and stopped at the doorframe. She was speechless at the sight of what it was before her eyes.

'Is it our kitchen?' At last she uttered, glancing around it. 'Do you expect me to cook here?' She whispered, holding back her tears.

It was a modern equipped kitchen. A pinkish marble-looking

counter ran along the wall and it was crowded with various kitchen utensils and electrical appliances, needed for the preparation of any kind of dishes. Under it there were placed a refrigerator, a washing machine, a dryer, and on her right an excellent stainless steel stove with two ovens. Everything would have been perfect, but of the minuscule size of the room. It could be no more than three, maximum four, square meters.

'Are you alright?' Marcus turned to face her. 'It's marvellous.' Noticing the disappointment on her face, he added quickly: 'Don't be concerned about its size. It's not so important for us today. I know it's very difficult to prepare a three-course meal in such a restricted space, but I don't mind if it will be overcooked or burned. I'll eat anything you'll make. Have courage! It's a temporary accommodation.' He caressed her on her shoulder.

'There is no way for two people to be in here.' She pointed to him.

'It's all right. I understand your disappointment, but let's try to be happy. Remember, we came here to improve our English, to get RP and try to make friends with some of these prudish people. If you don't like it here, we can move to any other country.' He kissed her quickly on the tip of her nose and pulled her gently into the sitting room.

'I don't think I can live in such conditions. I've never had to. You know it as well.' She exclaimed.

'Listen to me. They rented for us this flat in the best residential area of London. You cannot expect them to rent for you a luxury house. It's a regular flat for a middle class young couple, just married and having a highly paid position. None of us is employed. Yes, we have money but for how long can we manage to live on it?' He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes, trying to read its expression.

'It's horrible. This little cell reminds me of prison. I cannot stay here.' She was desperate now.

'Please calm down. I promise you, I'll think on how to change it

to a bigger place. We've just arrived. Please, my dear.' He cuddled her in his arms as if she was a baby. He knew that she was insecure and unwell.

'I'll try to adapt, I promise you. But I wish we could have something different. I'll get a job, any job, and we could move to a bigger, much bigger flat.' Demetra replied rapidly, hiding her face in his chest, so that Marcus could not see her tears. He kept silent, just hugged her closer.

'Let's have that coffee or it'll be too cold to drink.' She muttered, putting herself together. Then, freeing herself from his arms, she went to the sofa.

In front of it was a wooden trunk, with thick glass on top of it. It acted as a coffee table.

'Excellent.' Marcus brought the tray with two cups of coffee, some cookies and two apples. 'It's not much but I guessed you'd get some strength out of it.' He glanced at her and noted only then that she was still in her pyjamas.

'Do you want me to find your dressing gown?' He asked her politely, knowing she needed one.

'If you don't mind. It's in that black bag, next to the blue cool box. Thanks.' She looked at him and for the first time after many days, he caught in her eyes the same expression as he saw before her detention. She must be feeling better, he thought, rushing to do her bidding. He didn't care to consider her drugs making her feel better.

In no time, Demetra was in her red velvet dressing gown, which was too warm for that time of year, but she didn't mind.

'Could I have some water, please?' She smiled, lifting her hazel eyes to him and added: 'I hope you don't mind.'

'Everything for my beloved wife.' He went away again and was back with a tall glass in her hand.

'Thanks.' She smiled at him. She had the same expression as many months ago, when they met for the first time at Mr Issel's house.

He had to admit she looked regal in red, her long hair of ripen wheat loose, reaching below her waist. It almost reached the floor as she leaned her elbow and rested her head on her hand. Her narrow face was a perfect oval. Her skin was of milky white, without any flaw. She was still pale, but she looked almost like her normal self.

Slowly, she reached for the glass and sipped some water. Then she took the tiny cup with coffee and brought it to her lips. Then she tried some cookies.

'They're not so bad. Where did you get these?' she asked.

He always marvelled at her small mouth, with those slightly puffed lips. He felt like kissing them at once. And that was exactly what he did.

'As it's described in your beloved historic novels, I took some cash and went to the nearest supermarket.' Seeing Demetra's face, he laughed: 'Don't worry. I'll show you everything and in less than a week you'll be walking on these streets as local. You'll see its fun to buy what you like without worrying about being controlled on everything you got.' He laughed louder.

'I hope you're right.' Demetra was calm now. She was bewildered by everything surrounding her and wondered if she'd be able to adapt here. Again and again, the same worrying thoughts crowded in her head.

'If you feel strong enough to walk, prepare yourself. I want to show you your new world.'

'How about these?' She pointed to the luggage.

'We'll arrange it when we get back.'

Marcus removed the tray and brought it to the kitchen. 'We'll wash it later on.' Demetra didn't like to have dirty dishes, but it was not the time to argue. She just stood up and went back to the bedroom.

'We must dress up in the same room.' Demetra grimaced, glancing around her.

'I don't mind to have you around in negligee.' Marcus laughed, following her.

'You!' She made a face to him. 'I meant this room is too small for the two of us. I cannot imagine how I can arrange my dresser, wardrobe, hats, and shoes.'

'Stop for a second. You're not in Karsland. No one here buys clothes continuously. The ones you have now will be the only ones for a long time. Or at least, till we'll get some jobs and begin to earn some money.'

'Money? But we have plenty of it.' Demetra lifted her chin, arrogantly.

'It looks like that, but it's not so.' He contradicted. 'Rent for this mini flat is equal to the monthly pay of a highly educated person, with a middle-class income. If you spend all your salary on rent, on what you'll be living? I mean to buy food, clothes, doctors and etc?'

'Oh, no. I cannot imagine such life. Did you know we'd be in such position before we've left our country?'

'Of course I knew.' He confirmed.

'Why didn't you warn me? I needed time to think and decide about our future. I could choose a different place to live.'

'You're right; I didn't tell you about the difficulties of living abroad. There were two reasons: first, I know you could never live the life of Barbò. And second, it makes no difference to which European country we'll go. Europe is a poor and desperate continent, depleted of its original inhabitants. It became a third or maybe fourth world, as they used to call such countries in the past.' Marcus stopped and looked at her waiting for her reply.

'Well, I guess you're right. I'll try to adapt to these poor accommodations. I know what I'll do: I'll find a job immediately.' Demetra decided on the spot.

'Good idea!' He congratulated her. 'Let's hope you'll get it fast.' Glancing at his wristwatch, he added: 'If you feel strong enough, we could go for a short walk. Just to show you our new neighbourhood.' Demetra nodded; although she felt still weak, she didn't want to disappoint him.

She'll never forget her first impression of the street. When she stepped outside, the sun beamed on her face, blinding her with its reflection. The narrow road had a two-way traffic, with cars and taxis moving in a long queue. The tall trees were planted on the edges of non-so-wide sidewalks, stringing them to a narrow path. Masses of variegated people rushed in both directions. And what kind of people were there!

'Who are they? What's wrong with them?' Demetra asked Marcus, grabbing him by his arm.

'With who?'

'People.'

'What do you mean?'

'They're different. Black, white, yellow, dark-skinned and etc. Who are they? I've never seen such people.'

'It's London, my dear. City of all races, religions and so on. I don't understand your surprise.'

'Look at them. All these traditional clothes, women in *burka*, not to mention those ridiculous hair styles.' She tried to explain.

'There's nothing wrong. They were always like this. When I was here a few years ago, it was the same.'

'The same? Do you mean they didn't change hairstyle? Don't they wash their hair? Look how their hair is standing up, it's a lot of dirt or dust, maybe?' Demetra bewildered.

'They wash their hair, and then they put on a special hair gel to make it to stand up. It's fashion.' Marcus laughed heartily.

'What a fashion! How about their clothes? Look at them. They walk in winter boots with see-through summer dresses. I've never seen anything like this. They don't have any taste.'

'It's fashion, again. Here in London what's counting is not the taste. The craziest extravagance counts. To be different and impress everyone with that.'

'Poor things. The only thing which counts is mind, brains.'

'It's your mentality, not theirs.' Marcus took her by the elbow and slowly they descended the stairs leading to the sidewalk.

Being close to her, he could feel the scent of her expensive perfume and see carefully applied make-up. Her hair was held up in a tight knot on the top of her head. She had a linen summer dress, of light-greenish colour, midi-length, simple cut, but elegant. She was wearing her small flat canvas bag across her body, letting her hands free. She was regal and refined. Mentally, he compared her with Londoners surrounding them and he admitted to himself that she looked out of place.

They paced moving on the sidewalk, separated from the two-way road by the old thick oak trees, along the two-story townhouses of Edwardian type with miniature garden at their front and the heavy wooden doors with huge bronze door knocks. The houses were brick-finished and their dark colour made them look gloomy, despite of the bright sun, which was high in the sky that day.

'It's one of the most expensive areas of London.' Marcus reminded her, but she had difficulties to believe that.

After about fifty meters, they reached the famous King's Road, so much written and spoke about. They stopped for a moment to have a look in both directions and as far as they could see, there were various shops and crowds of people. The road was packed with cars, buses, taxis, vans, bicycles and so on, all of which could hardly proceed, stopping at pedestrian crossings to let people smoothly walk from one side of the street to the other. Noise was tremendous. The loud voices of people, sounds of tires, horns, the screams of children, up roaring laughter; all of those were creating an atmosphere so different from the calm one in Karsland that terrified Demetra, who thought for a moment of finding herself in hell.

'How can they live like this?' She sighed desperately. 'How can I live here?' Marcus just hugged her by her shoulders.

'Not here.' She tried to get free from his arms but, remembering it was England, she just laughed loud as the rest. '*In Rome do as Romans*.'

'You're quickly adjusting to new manners. We're not in Karsland. Here you can do what you want. Look there, straight, to the left. Do you see that couple kissing there? It's a free world.' Demetra followed his glance and saw the young couple hugging each other passionately. Also, she noticed everybody who passed them was pretending not to see their fervent embraces.

'I can imagine the reaction of any Barbò at this scene.' Demetra said slowly, still trying to get used to it. She could hardly believe it could be real.

Where was that England that she knew through books and media? Where were those conservative dressed and behaved people, who pretended to impose their cultivated manners and traditions on the rest of the world? Where were they? She looked around again. She was the only one who had a conservative look and correct manners, proclaiming her as a proper lady. She sighed, wondering what she could do then: either copy their vulgar manners and clothes, or stick to her own ways.

'I guess these two don't have family,' she said, trying to find a reason for the young couple's behaviour. 'Look at his trousers with holes and discoloration. The hem of the girl's dress is undone. It's small for her too, too tight and short. They must be very poor.'

'Oh no, my dear. It is fashion to dress as beggars,' he contradicted her.

'In that case, this fashion has been designed to make them used to those horrible clothes, in preparation for when they'll be poor, and then they won't be uncomfortable to walk on the street in those rags. It's in preparation for the future.' Demetra stated angrily.

'What's wrong with you? Are you taking this seriously? The time of ladies and gentlemen is in the past for many centuries in Europe, including your conservative England,' he closed the subject.

They turned to the right and began to walk, often stopping to

admire the shop windows. Especially one, "Just looking" was called, impressed her with its display typical of the middle of the twentieth century. It was eye-catching pop art style of the famous Allen Garnett, as she read on the bronze plate next to the entrance.

'Is it that Garnett or am I just dreaming?'

'For sure he's the one. Nothing disappears in London. People here know how to exhume from the past a fashionable trend and bring it back with new rigor and method, making it to be perceived as a classic. I'm not someone who will get convinced by such fraud. I don't give a damn about these little tricks and ploys. I'm not a vendor who needs to get a profit with the use of petty means.'

'All right. I see your point. Let's enjoy our walk.' She hated to get involved into critical conversation, as she called it. At present, she was more interested in knowing about clothing and household things. She just could not remove her eyes from the shop windows, with their exhibition of wide variety of goods. Its abundance was amazing. There were displays of everything she could have ever thought of.

'There is a much wider choice here than in Karsland.'

'It's true, but it's all-poor quality, mostly made in Asia. Colourful, but not lasting for long.' Marcus stated.

They had reached the supermarket at last. As they entered it, Demetra stopped for a moment at a familiar sight. It looked almost identical to any supermarket in Karsland. Eagerly, she looked around her. Forgetting about her illness or everything else, she rushed to the fruit and vegetable section, then to the dairy, then to the meat one. Any of those there were exactly as the ones she used to know, as long as she could remember. She dashed between the shelves and displays, and freezers. She was back home, forgetting there was a new life and land for her, to which she had to adapt and where she'd had to stay until the end of her days.

'Not so fast. Wait for me. Don't forget you must care for your spine.' She turned at Marcus' voice and saw him pushing a shopping cart in front of him. 'You must have one of these, don't you?'

'Thanks. It's wonderful. I love it. I'm back!' Demetra shouted, for once ignoring her manners.

'It's OK. Don't get overexcited. I knew you'd loved it. I'm afraid it's the only place that will remind you of your home. Let's get just the essential stuff for today and tomorrow.' he tried to calm her down. They began to move slowly and collect things they needed. Demetra always loved food shopping and used to buy a lot of things, but then she slowed down, remembering her kitchen was too small to accommodate a lot of food.

'Are you ready?' Marcus reached her, carrying a brown bag. 'It's delicatessen for us.' He winked.

'How about sweets?'

'You'll see it at home. It's a surprise for you.' Then he glanced at her shopping cart. 'You're not ready, are you?'

'I am. I cannot buy too much. Our refrigerator is too small.'

'Alright. Let's go pay.' He agreed. They went to the cashier. There was a queue of about five people.

'Look, they're registering the food as they do back home.' Demetra said, noticing the extravagantly-dressed woman in front of the cashier holding out a small card, similar to those used in Karsland. Diamond rings glistened on her fingers, in the brightly illuminated hall.

'Look at her. You've told me everyone is paying with money. But it's not so,' she insisted.

'Don't speak so loud. The others can hear you. It's not the card of registration of purchases. It's a credit, or better to say, a debit card. This card means someone pays for her and she owes money to somebody. Once per month she receives the bill and it must be paid in time.'

'And if this woman has no money to pay?'

'She'd be in trouble. Big trouble.'

'And what if she dies?'

'Her children and her husband will pay her debts.'

'I don't want to be in their place.' Demetra concluded. 'Look, what's she doing?' Demetra pointed again at the woman, who frantically browsed through her cardholder wallet giving to the cashier one card after the other, and the cashier, after sliding each of them through the opening in the cash machine, have been returning them with a negative nod. All of that was done in silence. Demetra noticed that everybody looked anywhere but at the agitated woman with a red face. The cashier tried the last card and returned it without result.

Suddenly, the woman grabbed all her cards, papers, dropped them into her bag and walked quickly away, ignoring the food packed into plastic bags. The stone-faced cashier pressed one of the buttons on the panel in front of her. Almost at once, a young boy dressed in uniform appeared. She pointed at the bags and the boy quickly loaded them into an empty shopping cart left by the woman and sped away with it.

'And now?' Demetra looked at Marcus.

'Nothing. She had no cash, no credit to pay. The boy will put all food back on the shelves for the next customer,' he explained in a cool voice.

'And the woman? She'll be hungry.'

'It's her problem.'

'I would never believe that such a rich looking lady could find herself in such an embarrassing situation.' Demetra stared at the back of the departing lady, until she disappeared from her sight.

'I guess she's one of the six millions British who will never come out of debts. She overspent this month and has no more credit. Don't worry for her. She'll go to her friends. They'll give her some drink and food and keep her going on till the end of the month. When she'll get her salary, she'll pay the minimum instalment on each of her credit cards and everything will be solved for her for the moment,' Marcus smiled.

'It's a slave's life. She's chained to those plastic cards.'

'Well, she has no willpower to stop buying. She's not alone.' The rest of the queue moved smoothly.

When it was their turn to pay, without rush Marcus held out a hundred-pound note. A muscle twisted on the cashier's stone face. She glanced twice at them and at the banknote, like not being sure on what to do next. After a few moments she pushed one of the buttons on the panel in front of her.

'Is something wrong? Why does she act like this?' Demetra whispered to him. 'Is our money no good?'

'Don't speak nonsense. Probably there are regulations concerning paper money.' He guessed right, since almost immediately a tall uniformed man neared to them.

The cashier silently held to him the banknote, which he took with a smile, turned it several times in his hands, then took a pen from his pocket and made a few strokes on it.

'It's OK.' He glanced at them again returning the banknote to the cashier who accepted it silently. Demetra lifted her eyes to Marcus.

'They checked its authenticity. There's a lot of false money around. No one pays with cash. When someone does, they all get agitated.' He laughed, pocketing the change.

'Let's go.' He lifted the three plastic bags leaving to Demetra one. 'I hope this isn't too heavy for you. There's just bread and some cookies.' He said and without waiting for her reply turned to the exit.

Demetra picked up her bag and went after him. She glanced at the huge wall clock. It was almost five o'clock. She felt hungry and tired and knew that, in short time, her pains would return. As she moved to the exit, more customers were coming in, all of them rushing, pushing each other, dropping a quick "Sorry" and pushing again.

They hurried on King's Road for one block only, then turned to Markham Street, then crossed Elystas Street, and after a short

walk they reached Sloane Avenue. From the outside, their building looked like a white whale, tall, fat, with a forest of transmitters on the roof.

The porter, a young thin man, opened the door and held it open for them. Stepping into the vestibule, it was like stepping into another world: bright, clean and comfortable, without loose clothes, bad manners and foreign tongues.

'Are you alright?' Seeing her gloomy face, Marcus asked her as soon as they had entered their flat. 'Smile. We're free to be what we want to.' He lightly pushed her.

'I have always been free to do what I wanted. I didn't have many problems with anything or anybody before.'

'Well, are you saying you've got your troubles thanks to me?'

'No, it's not your fault. Its life and that stupid old Thomas Askold.'

'Not a word about it.' He pulled her to him. She lifted her head and read his lips, telling her not to speak on the subject. Then he kissed her and everything was forgotten.

Chapter 28

'Is it still far?' Demetra asked her husband anxiously. They were on the way to the unemployment office, which was located in one of the low-income residential areas. For the first time in her life, Demetra found herself on the streets, covered with all kinds of garbage and crowded by various people. To move forward they were forced to manoeuvre between the people, endlessly touching somebody else's shoulders. The air was heavy with smoke, smell of some strange food and some incense; the metallic sound of the windbreakers and loud rock music would have driven crazy a much stronger person than Demetra, who was not used to it. She began to wonder, how can one stay sane in such environment, but she didn't have time to broad her thoughts as they had reached their destination and stopped in front of a tall glass door opened wide, seeming to invite anyone in. On the right of the door Demetra, saw a bronze plaque and read 'HM…'

'It's here. Follow me.' Marcus said moving quickly to the door. Demetra did. But to avoid the collision with a young couple, who was coming directly to her, she stepped aside to make them way and fell far behind her husband. She saw his coat in front of her, and then it disappeared. Suddenly she panicked. She moved forward, ignoring the flow of people, working with her elbows and shoulders, she made her way into the building.

She faced a huge hall, with a very high ceiling painted in black and white, walls covered with cork boards, full of sheets of papers, up to the eye-level. People were swarming near the walls, each trying to read what's offered there. Others, who could not get close to the wall, were pressing the first row to speed up. They looked like a millions bees, flying inside and making such an unbearable sound. In Demetra's eyes there was a full chaos, bedlam

ruled in that 'HM…' building, as she named it, having been able to read only those two letters before entering.

In a hurry, she glanced in both directions but there was no sign of the familiar figure. She was in the middle of a rough, bad-dressed, loud speaking and loud laughing, alien crowd. She was desperately wondering on what to do next, when she heard her surname called on the hailer. She missed the most of the announcement but she knew it had to be repeated at least once more. She was right. 'Mrs Vanderson, please come to Room 141.'

'Could you please tell me where Room 141 is?' She asked politely a tall white man on her right. Slowly, he turned his head and stared at her without uttering a word. Then he walked away. His attitude surprised her, but she didn't care for losing her time on him. She turned to her left. There was an Asian man, small and dark. She repeated her question to him, but he didn't even bother to look at her. This time Demetra got angry.

'Is there someone who could tell me where Room 141 is?' She yelled. Suddenly the silence fell on the hall. Everyone turned on her voice to see who had dared to shout there. She spotted the disapproving and arrogant expressions on their faces, but no one broke the silence that was now reigning in there.

'I just cannot believe that there is no one here who could tell me where Room 141 is, or at least to show me to an information desk.' Her voice was hysterical now. She was anxious to find Marcus; worrying about her, he'll start to look for her and then for sure they would lose each other in that confusion.

Frantically, she looked around her again. Her eyes asking for help, but her call seemed to be a scream in the desert. She could not figure out what she did wrong to get such an unfriendly response from those people. There was no sign for information desk either. She stood and waited, not knowing for what.

After a few more moments of silence, the noise and the crowd's motion resumed. Demetra felt helpless and small and being lost in that hostile rough world. Just as she was ready to burst into

tears, someone pulled her by her sleeve. She turned and saw a young black man.

'You must be not English,' he whispered to her, 'follow me. I'll show you the way.' He moved to the left. Demetra after him. They crossed the hall, turned to the left into a long corridor.

'Go forward and look at numbers. Room 141 is down there.' He pointed to somewhere in front of them.

'Thank you very much. I appreciate…,' Demetra began.

'Not at all. You must be new to London. After a while, you shall be acquainted with its customs and will know what to do and what not to. For your information, call this office before coming here. They'll give you precise directions for finding the room.' He explained and quickly disappeared.

Demetra went along the corridor until she reached Room 141. She put her hand on the handle and turned it. The door opened silently revealing a big room, full of writing desks and file cabinets.

'Demetra.' She heard her husband's voice. Turning she saw Marcus sitting near one of the desks, which was presided by a white tight-lipped old man with wrinkled nose. She went to them.

'This is my wife, Demetra Vanderson.' Marcus introduced her.

'Sorry. I got lost in the crowd.' She apologised quickly, smiling to the man.

'Of course. Take a seat.' The man's voice was patronising, but his face was disapproving. 'Well, I have been informed you're unemployed and in need of financial support. Well, we've checked your bank account. You're well off in comparison, with many others. As long as you have some money on your account, we're not accepting your application for welfare. You haven't work in this country, so you are not legible for unemployment benefits. We can do nothing for you. Find a job, any job, at least for one year, then you come back to us and we'll help you as long as you have no money on your bank account.' He stopped staring directly into Marcus's face.

'I guess you didn't understand why we're here. We're not asking for a financial support. We came for advice on finding a job. At least for my wife. She's an engineer, specialised in software languages. For sure, some company is looking for such type of specialist.' Marcus clarified their presence in the office.

'Yes, she is a qualified professional, but we cannot help her for two reasons. She's white and she is old for an entry level into a labour force. She's thirty-three. If she was twenty-three, we could easily place her anywhere but at thirty-three with a huge cash deposit in the bank, she and you with her don't need to look for any job, until you've spent all your money.' The man raised his eyebrows.

'You call it "money"?' Marcus reddened in his face. 'It's peanuts. Our flat costs two thousand pounds per month and we've only hundred thousand, as you know very well. How long can we survive?'

'You can always find a flat with a more reasonable rent. Change area, for example.'

'Change area? Where to? To Brixton?' Marcus was getting agitated.

'What's wrong with Brixton? There are the same citizens as you. Do you have any objections against those poor souls who've left their homes in the desperate attempt to get a better life?' A half-smile covered the officer's face, but his eyes were hard and calculating, waiting for the other man's reply.

'No, I don't. Good morning.' Marcus cut off abruptly their conversation, rose from his chair and taking Demetra by the hand, pulled her quickly to the door. Not having the chance to say "Good-bye", she found herself in the corridor, next to the closed door with Marcus still holding her hand. She looked at him questionably, not understanding why he ran away from the room.

'Did you see what he tried to pull on us?'

'No.'

'Good for you. He saw we're demanding his help for finding jobs

for us, but he didn't want to bother with us. Quickly, he turned tables on us trying to incriminate us with Race and Hate Law.'

'What are those about?'

'It's long to explain. Let's go, quickly, out of here. I'll tell you later on.' He said, pulling her with him as he walked in wide strides to the exit. Demetra trotted next to him. Back on the street, they stopped momentarily to orient themselves.

'I wouldn't mind drinking something. I'm thirsty and tired.' Demetra said.

'I know, but we'll be better off in our cosy flat. I'll get a cab.' Marcus said, stepping closer to the road. He spotted a black, bulky vehicle with red light on. Marcus lifted his arm and the vehicle stopped smoothly in front of them.

'To Sloane Avenue.' At the nod of the driver, they went in.

'Wow, it's so comfortable.' Demetra mused. 'I've just walked in. The ceiling is quite high.'

'It's one of the last relics of the past. It's in use by upper classes. They like to be comfortable. The company still produces these ugly black half-limousine, half-car vehicles, as long as someone is ready to pay for hiring it.'

She enjoyed their ride. They were passing through the city, packed with people who seemed running somewhere in hurry; they were so different by behaviour, appearance and clothes that she could not identify their origins. She was sure of one thing only: there were few European faces on the streets. Turning into Green Park, they slowed down and stopped in the traffic.

'What's going on there?' Demetra's curiosity had no limits.

'I don't know, but knowing that today is a Tishah-b'Ab, I guess the Royal family went to the oldest synagogue.' The driver entered into their conversation readily. Marcus didn't care to get involved into that subject.

'Can we get to see something? I want to see the King and the Queen. King Joseph is a handsome man, I've heard.' Demetra continued.

'From the mother's side, he descends directly from King David of Israel.' The driver replied briskly.

'And the father's?' Demetra asked. No one replied to her. They sat in silence, stuck in the traffic. Strange enough, there was no blowing horns or any sound at all. Demetra itched to ask about the Royalty, but the driver's black gloomy face was not inviting to conversation.

After a long wait, they began to move again, slowly and then faster, till they reached Green Park and faraway they spotted the golden carriage driven by twelve white horses, the pages standing on the back.

'It's a fairy tale.'

'Maybe it looks like it but we don't know if it's really a fairy tale.' Suddenly, the driver was rude with her. He pressed hard the gas pedal and kept silent for the rest of their ride.

Back to their flat, Marcus switched the TV on and they watched the full praying ceremony on Tisha B'Av, which was transmitted from the synagogue where the Royal Family was attending. It was a very pompous, resplendent ceremony that continued for many hours, giving the impression of something unreal and inexplicable. It is different, Demetra thought.

'I must refresh my memory on England, unless I'll make a fool of myself in front of people. I thought the King was the head of Anglican Church.' Demetra said

'Me too. But it looks like there were many changes that we've missed on.' Marcus agreed.

Looking back to 1688 when the real king, James II, was forced into exile on the base of his Catholic faith and a new king, William of Orange, was installed by the Parliament, it is known as the Bloodless Revolution. England was the first to overthrow the king and let the rich merchants to run the country through Parliament. The new system was called Constitutional Monarchy, although the method of its implementation was a democracy, which word was vigorously avoided in the Puritan England of that time.

One by one, the antique Royal family traditions were rejected or deleted by the Government, except for pompous ceremony, or better to say the theatrical show displayed on special occasions. Little by little, the Parliament, together with mass media, managed to omit all amendments preventing for anyone to become the King. The most important of all was the religious faith. The law stating that the King of England was the Head of Anglican Church had been declared unacceptable in the democratic society and was cancelled, after many centuries in use.

Well, after the twenty-first century the King or the Queen of England could marry anyone. It didn't take too long for young Prince Andrew to meet the beautiful Miriam. They married at Buckingham palace, the ceremony was performed by the Rabbi; and from that time on, the Royal family treasured the Jewish faith, finding it more suitable to the English life. There was nothing new in converting to Judaism for the ruling class. In antique Khazaria, the eighth century AC, King Bulan converted to Judaism to marry his love and then the whole country accepted this religion.

Up until then, the majority of British people consisted of Indians, Africans and Asians who came from different countries and kept their own religion. The minority of English Anglican Church people was so insignificant, that no one seemed to care or oppose to it. Even if someone could dare to say something against it, one would have thought twice before doing so; it was not worth to disturb one's life because of one's religion.

Brought up to believe into intellect and knowledge, Demetra found it peculiar even to speak about religion. For her, it was an antique thing that had disappeared in Karsland long before she was born. The clear division between Stakhanò and Barbò had been accepted by all; each of the social groups was proud of its position and its ways of life. Nothing interested them, except for new clothes and new cooking recipes for Barbò and timely completion of task giving for Stakhanò. Well, as a new British citizen, Demetra knew she needed quickly to update herself on British life.

'I would like to have a laptop and Internet.' Demetra said to Marcus.

'Anything for my lovely wife.' Marcus smiled.

* * *

The British Islands had been lucky when it came down to climate change in Europe. In the biggest part of Europe the heavy cold rains replaced snowfalls during winter and continued as drizzle for the rest of the year, while the former was granted the cold winds which every year have been sweeping away the rains and its humidity. During summertime, there was plenty of sun and warmth, which made the life of Londoners easy and comfortable.

Each summer London was full of foreign tourists, running from the bad weather and degraded slums of the major cities. There were varieties of outdoor activities for each taste. Colourful, artfully designed advertisements placed around the city, describing antique castles, variegated museums, shopping areas, and famous theatre areas, old and antique markets and so on.

Demetra rushed to enjoy the offerings of the big city. She made a list of the places she had to see and studied everything about those methodically, like it was the most important thing in the world. She managed to convince Marcus to visit a few of the most famous places.

What a disappointment she got!

She made a reluctant Marcus to bring her to Victoria and Albert Museum, which, as she had read in Karsland's encyclopaedia, was regarded as the world's greatest collection of the decorative arts of European civilisation.

With her heart beating fast she mounted the antique granite steps, worn out in many places, leading to the elaborately decorated thick oak door. All her expectations vanished in the instant she read the notice engraved on the bronze plate. It stated that the museum was closed until further notice. Why? How long for? Demetra could not believe her bad luck.

'I'm not going to be disappointed. We're Londoners now and will be back when it's open,' she stated to Marcus who stood next to her, silently.

'I'm very sceptical about the reopening of this building,' an old lady stopped near them, 'I was born and lived all my life here on Hans Street. This museum was already closed when I was born. My mother said it'd never reopened, after a fire made it to close over hundred years ago. I don't think you need to bother to come back.' She said and went away, leaving both of them to wonder about London's attractions.

'We can go to the British museum. For sure, they cannot close both of the most famous places.' Demetra offered.

'Are you sure you want to do it today? Maybe we can go some other day. You must be tired already.'

'I'm alright. I want to see something world famous. The British Museum is on my list of the must see.' She smiled. 'Let's go now. By tube it is not so far.' Marcus agreed.

It was a tiresome trip, even if it took just a few tube stops, two connections from one line to the other. Walking along several long narrow and dirty tunnels with strong cold or hot wind, depending on the time of the year, could worn out a stronger person than Demetra. She walked stoically, hiding her fatigue and desperation.

It took them over an hour to reach the British Museum. The last leg of their journey, the distance from tube station to their destination, Demetra would have never made if it was not for Marcus. He practically carried her to the entrance door, wondering where she could get the strength to walk through the long corridors and halls of that huge building. Demetra kept silent, hoping to get some of her strength back, after getting some rest at the vestibule of the museum. She was sure there would have been some chairs to rest on.

Again, with her heart beating, she walked through the threshold of the opened door to find herself in a huge hall. It was mag-

nificent. The marble columns, the ornamental decorations, the antique frescoes, marble busts, all of those things made her feel like she was at last in the midst of antiquaries. There were no chairs to seat on for visitors. When Marcus asked for one, he was told it was against security regulations. No one should be lingering in that area.

They were told to buy tickets to enter the exhibition. Demetra was under the impression that the museum was free. She decided to ignore that small precondition, being inpatient to enter into the Aladdin's cave of archaeology.

They passed through the door into the first hall, and it was bare empty. There were the very high ceiling, supported by marble columns and the walls covered with marble and nothing more. They went to the second hall, it was the same. The third had nothing in it either.

'Excuse me, I have a question.' She went to the supervisor, who sat on the chair near the door. The woman looked at her with some kind of dislike.

'Yes.' A hostile expression was clear on her face.

'We've passed through three halls, but there were no displays.' Demetra started politely.

'What do you mean there were no displays? It is not enough for you to admire the structure of these antique halls, beautiful marble columns and antique decorated ceilings? I thought it is more than enough for a casual visitor.' The woman said briskly in a loud voice.

'I was looking for the Egyptian collection. I've read the British museum is famous for it.'

'It was here a long time ago, before the great fire. Ever since then, we do not display any Egyptian collection.'

'How about the Elgin Marbles which were removed from the Parthenon in Athens? They must be still here. I haven't heard of them having being returned to Greece.'

'Of course not. Those marbles were sent away for restoration

about fifty years ago. They haven't come back yet. Restaurateurs need time to recover these things.' The woman stopped and looked with loathing at Demetra. 'Do you have any more questions?'

'No, thanks.' Demetra just glanced at Marcus who stood near her, with a strange expression on his face. One glance at his face told her that she should know better than to ask someone who was employed there. There would always be the right answer to any right question.

'I'm ready to go home.' Demetra stated and turned back to the door.

'You cannot leave the hall through that door. You must follow this sign until you'll see one showing you to the exit.' The woman pointed at the arrow sign on the floor.

'And if we don't want to continue, how can we leave here?'

'There is no other way out but to go forward.' She said firmly and turned her head from them. Nothing could reduce her to speak again. Stubbornly, she looked away pretending not to hear them.

They continued to walk through two more huge empty halls, until Marcus spotted an arrow showing to the exit. They went that way. They passed through several dark silent tunnels and then they reached a huge metal door painted in red. On top of it was the sign Exit. They pushed it and found themselves in a small, plain hall, guarded by one old man sitting on the chair. Through the double glass doors Demetra saw the street.

'At last. Let us get away from here as soon as possible.' She took Marcus by the hand and they almost run to the exit doors.

'If I could tell someone in Karsland about our today's adventures, no one would believe me. I would be branded as a liar. Would you believe me?' Demetra sounded cheerful to Marcus's surprise.

* * *

She went alone to the British Library, not daring to ask Marcus to accompany her.

She was glad she was alone when she reached the building. She found out that no one could enter the British Library without a special permission issued by the local police office. This procedure was implemented after a fire, occurred by one visitor who got offended by one of the employees. He threw burning paper into the book storage the moment someone opened the door to get out of there.

The fire began to spread with such speed that, before the arrival of fire-fighters, half of book storage was in flames. It took several hours to put it down, but there was no way to save the books. It was a tremendous loss. Most of the books were unique copies. But to the luck of the country, all books listed in the British Library were photocopied and saved on films.

Demetra wondered about women wearing *burka*, when they needed to enter the library, how could the police take their photo with covered face. With all their talk about security procedures, there was no real security in London. Every time Demetra passed women with covered faces or in a full *burka*, she felt as of being in some alien planet, where there was no place for her. She had an urge to run away from that city.

She decided to give up on sightseeing; there was a big difference between promising things in writing and the reality of London.

Chapter 29

They completed the first two weeks in the new country. During that time, she thought about getting a job but the temptations of London were so strong, that even she fell under its spell. Seeing her in good spirits and better health, Marcus didn't mention to her anything about the money. He thought that the middle of summer was not a right time to look for a job. Better to wait until September and then they could see what to do.

As soon as Marcus left to take care of a few things, she put in order everything after the breakfast. Then she checked her outing list. For that day she had planned a trip to the famous Harrods Department Store.

The moment she stepped outside, a red two-deck bus passed her by. She thought it would be not a bad idea to take the bus, especially since she had noticed the bus stop was just across the road and to the right. Quickly, she crossed the street and reached the bus stop. Looking around she spotted a sign 'newspapers, bus tickets and etc.' It was exactly what she needed.

Without delay, she went to the heavy glass door. It was a typical newspaper shop: a small narrow area filled up with newspapers, magazines, various snacks, soft drinks & etc. She went directly to the counter. At the cashier machine was an Indian man, short, dark and half-smiling. She asked him about bus tickets and which type of those he could recommend.

At the sound of her accent, his welcoming smile disappeared and he asked her briskly. 'I've a daily ticket and a single ride one. Which do you want?'

'I guess a daily ticket will be fine. I can use it on my return trip, can't I?' Demetra spoke politely.

'Two pounds.' He said without looking at her. She held him out a ten-pound note.

'Don't you have change?'

'Sorry, I don't.'

He took her money and went to the ticket machine. Picking up the ticket, he opened the cashier machine, and Demetra saw him counting coins. Then he returned to her and gave her a ticket and dropped on the counter her change. At the sight of ten and five cents coins Demetra got stunned.

'Don't you have a five-pound note and three pounds in coins? You cannot give me all of these.' She revolted pointing to the counter.

'I've only that for you. This is money too. Take it,' he replied, insolently looking at her with a twisted smile. Demetra didn't know what to do.

It was the first time in her life that she was treated so rudely. She felt helpless in the face of such insult and angry at herself for not knowing what to reply or how to defend her under such circumstances. She looked at him speechless, but he turned his head away pretending to study something. His posture told her that their business was over: 'Take it and leave.' Demetra glanced around her helplessly, being lost at such vulgarity and imprudence. She bent her head looking at the coins again. With the angle of her eye, she saw the man disappearing behind the curtains. She was alone then. Take it and go, the thought hammered in her brain. She sensed it was the only sensible thing to do, but her pride was preventing her from doing it.

The bell rang, announcing a new customer entering the shop. In that moment Demetra decided quickly. She swept the coins into her palm and walked away quickly, promising never to enter those premises again.

Back on the street, she stood for a while trying to calm down, her heart hammered and her face burned, and glancing at her hand she noted it was slightly shaking. The beautiful red bus

arrived and left, but Demetra didn't board on it. She looked at the ticket, which she clinched in her hand and felt nauseous at the cost of getting it. Slowly she tore it in many tiny pieces and again swore to herself never to enter that place again and try to use as less as possible the city bus in the future. She opened her palm and looked again at the handful of coins. They were burning in her palm and she looked around wondering how to get rid of it. Not far from her, she noticed a young man dressed in rugs, looking like a drug addict. She was sure, he needed some money. Without thinking twice, Demetra went quickly to him. The man lifted his head and seeing a well-dressed lady in front of him, he stepped back cautiously to avoid her.

'Take this change and go buy yourself something to drink. Drink to my health.' She said and held out her hand. Understanding at last what she meant, the man smiled humbly. He stretched his hand and turned the palm up. Demetra poured the coins into his dirty hand and quickly turned to the right crossed the road, not caring for traffic.

'Thanks, m'lady, thanks.' She heard him mumbling.

To her surprise, that episode calmed her down and she decided to stick to her original plan – visit the Harrods. The insecurity of being on the street alone, which she experienced during her first days after arrival, disappeared and she was now quite comfortable to be there.

She turned around the corner and walked quickly along the long street until she reached the Catholic Church. Then she crossed the road and continued on Cadogan Street, through Cadogan Square, Hans Place until she reached her destination. Her mood fully recovered from the earlier encounter and she was already enjoying the sunny morning, which was promising to turn into a warm day.

She was contented and satisfied with herself knowing that her clothes were of the latest Italian Designer, who was the fashionable at present. If someone would have asked her, on her arriv-

al to London, about caring for designer labels or the clothing in general, she would have vehemently denied it. But then, being already corrupted by the advertisements of the local life and WAG style, which left over thirty thousand young women to declare bankruptcy just in one year, she was glad she possessed the clothing which the others were dreaming of having. It was one of the biggest surprises when she found out that Karslanders were lucky to have everything that the rest of the Europeans were wishing to have.

There was no way to miss the Harrods. A monumental tall building of mixed architectural styles, partly Baroque, partly Victorian, with fancy-cut glass windows and heavy wooden doors with brass doorknockers dominated Basil Street which ran on its back. Demetra crossed it and quickly went to the nearest door.

'Good day, ma'am.' A formidable doorman in top hat and green coat frog with gold braid opened the door for her. She smiled to him and went in.

She had heard and read about that famous place, but the impact at seeing it with her own eyes, was still too powerful. She was not a novice to Department Stores. There were many of those in Karsland, fancy, rich, and colourful but the Harrods in her eyes beaten any other.

It was a sea of lights, created by gigantic chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings; the goods on display had been arranged in a way to attract customer's attention from any angle of the store. The designer-dressed customers rushed from all directions; creating the impression that there was something going on somewhere in the store and one must run not to miss some special event. Demetra was swept by that atmosphere and joined the others in that mindless rush.

She entered directly into the Men's Clothing department, but quickly passed it to enter into the Ladies' Heaven starting from Luxury Goods, Accessories and etc. Then she turned to the left and stopped at the entrance, being blinded by the brightest illu-

mination that she'd ever met inside shops. It was the light of diamonds what came down on her.

Diamonds! The girl's best friends! And they were such.

It was incredible in Demetra's eyes that the colourless hard stone that have been used for a long time as a glass cutter had been transformed into such high-priced item, gradually becoming the symbol of wealth, luxury and power. In the past, it was common knowledge, *Morrisons* were in charge of the diamond industry and their monopoly was unquestionable. As centuries went by, in South Africa that precious industry was twice nationalised and twice privatised; nationalised a third time for good, after finding out that there were no diamonds left in the ground. The disappearance of hundreds of thousands of tons of that precious stone became one of the greatest enigmas of all times, which helped to maintain its high price on the world's market ever since. Demetra wondered what diamond's oligarchs of the past did with thousands tons of those stones.

Slowly, she moved from one display to the other admiring fancy earrings, flamboyant necklaces, and bourgeois rings, all of those sparkling and shining. Mirrored walls were reflecting and multiplying the abundance of riches, as well as the light of crystal chandeliers. Demetra was dazed by such parade of riches and all that she could do was just to gaze around her.

One of the mirrored walls had a peculiar sign with two sphinxes facing east and West and on top of it was a sign '*Moseff Diamonds*'. Demetra stopped, attracted by the bright, red sign and then shifting her eyes below it, she spotted a familiar face.

At first moment she could not recall the place where she had met that man, but his figure was familiar to her, the same as the set of his head and as soon as she noted a nervous tick on his left cheekbone, she recognised him at once. He was one of the six flying with them from Karsland. The six marble statues, as she called them. But here he was alive, full of movement, smiles and energy. Just the tick on his face was all that was left from the marble statue on the plane.

As she continued to stand and look at him, he suddenly raised his eyes and met hers. She saw the expression on his face had changed. He had recognised her, she thought.

Then he turned his back to her and disappeared to nowhere. She continued to look and noticed the door concealed artfully between mirrors. Why he ran from her, she thought. She would speak to him, although she knew it could have been against social acceptable behaviour. She had been missing her home so much, that she was ready to ignore any customs, just to speak with someone who was from Karsland and knew its way of life. She could not figure out why that man chose to avoid her. In her opinion, his escape was the strangest thing he could do. Still pondering over it, she looked around, still hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Then, the uncanny feeling of being watched came over her. Momentarily she was taken by panic, but suppressed it at once. Without delay, she left the Diamond department, entering directly into the Food Halls.

Food Halls at Harrods were famous all around the World. Demetra was sure about that from that time when she overheard the appraisal of it by two Barbò back home. Who could know better about food than Barbò! They spent all their life in preparation of meals.

She was not disappointed at her entrance. She found herself in the Meat department.

It was an adventure itself to discover that each hall was dedicated either to fish or to meat or to delicatessen, with its corresponding decoration. All of those were colourful and fancy, as imagination could create. It was not surprising that Food Halls were packed with customers and there were long queues to each counter.

She went to the Baked Goods department. At the sight of the variety of bread, pastries, pies and cookies, her head began to spin. Her Russian nature demanded to get all of it, since the grains were their main food. There was an impressive selection of various breads baked with wheat, rye or maize and their mix-

tures. Without thinking too much, she bought several loafs of bread, each of a different type, forgetting that to finish all of that she would need a long time.

Then she took a lift to the third floor and found herself directly in the Book department. It was impressive. The walls were covered with thick oak shelves, almost black from the age. All of them were filled with books, hard covers and paperbacks, small and big, thousands books on various subjects and matters. Slowly, Demetra moved from one shelf to the other, glancing at the titles to find out what was offered there. The majority of those were about British Isles, its history and war battles, and the Royal family. There was quite a good collection about African and Asian cultures, and practically nothing about Europe. One of the biggest sections was dedicated to scrupulous biographies of famous British people, and on a separate shelf was allocated the Entertainment celebrities section, who was granted peerage over the past several centuries. Their number was impressive. Then, she noted some books on such subjects as astrology, witchcraft and others which were regarded as out-dated junk in Karsland, and no one Stakhanò could care to keep one of those in her or his home library. Although, Barbò liked to use some table games, such as speaking to spirits with the help of tables, for party amusement.

Suddenly, the pain in her back let her knew it was time to take a pill. She glanced around and noting a sign directing to the bar, she went there. Passing through a short wooden-panelled corridor, she entered one of the over thirty cafeterias of Harrods.

'Could I have a glass of water, please? I need it to take some medicine.' She asked a short, swarthy man who seemed in charge there.

'Five pounds.' He replied. Demetra thought he didn't understand her.

'I just want a half glass of tap water.' She explained.

'Tap water is non potable. I cannot serve it. A glass of bottled water costs five pounds.' He repeated.

'You cannot be serious.'

'You want some water, don't you? Nothing is free here. I must wash a glass after you've used and sterilise it. Don't you know we're still recovering after the latest pandemic?' He explained in a low toneless voice. Demetra looked at him closer.

He was a young Indian man in his early twenties, dressed in a white uniform, with white cap on his head, rubber gloves on his hands. His face was serious, he wasn't joking. If he'd have a face mask, he could be ready to work in a hospital, Demetra laughed at her thoughts. She got a ten-pound bill and put it on the counter. At the sight of the money, the boy immediately went to get her order. He placed a tall glass full of water, covered with porcelain lid, on a coaster.

'We disinfect covers, too.' He explained quickly taking her money. He brought her change. Demetra glanced; it was a five-pound note.

The next moment Demetra burst out in loud laugh that broke through the respectable quietness of the place, making some customers to glance disapprovingly at her, although the majority pretended to ignore such vulgar behaviour. Let them pretend to be right, she knew by then the real manners of British people. She laughed, thinking about porcelain flat covers in sterilizer when the city streets were full of discarded papers, paper cups, spits, chewing gum and etc. not mentioning the rats running on Downing Street in front of the Prime Minister's flat, as she saw on TV news. These British must be funny people, she thought. The ringing of her mobile phone interrupted her thoughts.

'Yea?' She answered it.

'It's me.' The sound of her husband's voice made her laugh again.

'What's so funny?'

'You don't need to say, "It's me". You're the only one who can call me,' she readily explained.

'I know, but I want you to be sure. Come home at once. We have an emergency here.'

'Are you already back? What do you mean by emergency?'

'I cannot speak on the phone. Come quickly. I'm waiting,' he repeated and hung up. Demetra rushed to the exit, wondering what was going on there. It had to be some news about some job, or maybe something from home, she thought, wondering for how long she will be considering Karsland as her home.

* * *

'Wow. What's going on here,' Demetra exclaimed at the sight on their flat. She went to the bedroom. It was all topsy-turvy.

The doors of the wall closets were wide open. The huge suitcases, which were neatly arranged on their top shelves, were pulled down, and their contents overturned on top of clothing that were usually hang in the wardrobe. All things were scattered around the bedroom.

The drawers of her dresser were overturned on the bed and left on top of her French lingerie. Shoes, ties, trousers, shirts, all the immaculate wardrobe of her husband, were on the floor. Demetra didn't dare to think about her designer's things.

'What's happened here?' Her eyes were round as plates.

'I don't know. I've found our flat as you see it. I can't figure out who and why could do it to us? I wonder if it was a bad joke, or someone looking for something. There must be some mistake. Maybe they wanted something from the former tenant. We're here only two weeks.'

'I'm sure someone's mistaken us for former, unless someone saw us paying by cash and decided to robe us. It was a plain robbery,' she concluded.

They returned to the sitting room. There was the same mess as in the bedroom. Books, papers and various small things were discarded on the sofa, coffee table or directly on the floor. Demetra picked up some books from the sofa and plopped down on the cleared place.

'I hope it's as simple as you say.' Marcus replied and sat next to her on top of some papers.

'You should not sit on the books,' Demetra pointed out.

'You seemed being more concerned about anything except our safety,' he irritably replied.

'It must be an attempt of robbery. What else could it be? We don't have any acquaintances, any friends, anyone who could be interested in us.'

'It's true, but I still find it very strange.' He leaned on the back and stared at the ceiling.

'Do you think we should report to the police?' Demetra looked at him.

'I don't see how police could help us. It's true; they'll come here to take evidence, fingerprints, samples of our DNA and then what? At the end, they'll get our DNA, file it in their files and from this day on us, you and I, will be listed on the police registers but not as thieves. No, we cannot go to the police. Let us put everything in place and see if something is missing. Maybe you're right about the robbery.' Marcus rose. 'I'll arrange my things and you do yours. Then we can decide on what to do next.'

Demetra didn't need a second invitation. She quickly followed him and sort out everything that was hers. She put in place all her clothes, lingerie, cosmetics, handbags, shoes and so on, and found out there was nothing missing. Then, she arranged the sitting room, kitchen and again everything was present. After several hours their flat was back in order: clean, trim and elegant. They sat on the sofa again.

'I don't miss anything,' Demetra uttered, heavily panting after a long exhausting job.

'I don't either.'

'Well, it must be some kind of joke,' she added.

'A bad joke.'

'Maybe it's common in London.'

'Don't speak nonsense. I was here before but nothing of such kind happened to me.' Marcus rejected her idea.

In that moment in Demetra's brain flashed the last New Year's

Eve, the cave full of treasures, and some papers which she snatched from one of the desks and pushed it deep into one of the pockets of her ski jacket. Which one? Since her arrest and intensive drugging during her detention, she didn't recuperate her excellent memory. She still suffered a partial loss of it and, for sure, she had never thought about those papers until then.

She slowly rose and went to the bedroom. She opened the part of the closet containing her wardrobe. On top shelf were suitcases, those she had rearranged not long ago. She pulled out one containing her winter gear.

'What are you doing there?' It was Marcus. 'Let me help you.'

'Thanks.' Together they brought the huge suitcase on top of the bed. Marcus unlocked it. The cover jumped out as a spring, revealing its contents.

'Don't speak. Use sign language.' Demetra warned him with gesticulation. Then she reached for the first jacket. She went through its pockets but there was nothing. Carelessly throwing it aside, she took the second one and repeated her search. Then she took the third and so on. It seemed she could not find what she was looking for. Suddenly, her red agitated face reminded him of something. Without delay, Marcus bent over the suitcase and pulled out the ski jacket, which she wore on New Year's Eve trip.

'Are you looking for this?' He signed to her.

'You've figured out about the jacket, haven't you?' She signed back, taking the garment and hurryingly putting it on. It was one of those widely advertised designer ski jackets, famous for its numerous zippered pockets, artfully hidden between various pleats and folds. As soon as she had it on, her left hand went exactly to the secret pocket from which she retrieved a few sheets.

Marcus watched her in astonishment; she read the wonder in his eyes and laughed loud at his expression.

'I think someone have been looking for it,' she signed to him.

'I begin to think some people need more training before they're sent on job,' he signed back, laughing together with her.

'What do we do?'

'To begin with, let's see what's there.' He took the piece from her and unfolded it.

It was a cream-coloured, thick paper with watermarks. Demetra held it against the light and she recognised the Moseff coat of arms, which is on display in Diamond department in Harrods. She hastily signed to Marcus about her findings in Harrods, about *Moseff Diamonds* and the man with the nervous tick. Seeing a disturbing expression on his face, she began to wonder if she had spoken too much.

'I don't think we'll be able to figure out its meaning,' she signed again, looking at the message written on the paper. There were sequences of numbers and letters, some in capitals, some not. 'I'm sure the table is computerized. It's highly advanced software; 24-number line is not used frequently. Of course, I might be wrong.'

'We must take care of it. It should not disappear before we'll find out what it is.' Marcus signed and folded the paper again. He glanced around making Demetra to wonder about a hiding place. Those papers, carelessly forgotten for so long, unexpectedly became a very important document, so important that someone dared to enter their flat and desperately looked for it.

'I'll take care of it,' he signed and put it into his inner pocket.

'Why you?'

'You're not well. If something happens to you they'll do everything to get it. With me it is different.' He glanced at the wall clock. 'It looks like we're losing a grip on our Karsland's civilisation. I've lost count on how many times we're late for any of our meals. Our daily schedule didn't improve since we came here. Just the opposite. It's almost six. I'm famished.'

'Let me see if I've got something ready.' She went to the kitchen. Marcus put on the TV. She could hear it. 'And now you go behind the screen and remove all of your clothes and study each other. You know, Sussy, you're ten years older and after having four

children, your body is different. And you, Bob, tell us what you think about Sussy's tits.'

'What a crazy program!' It was Marcus's voice now.

'Don't they have respect for each other? This woman must be mad to agree to face the young man, especially if he is her husband, and letting him describe her saggy body parts,' Demetra exclaimed terrified.

'It's one of the many programs that British people love.'

'It looks like British women do things which harm them, but they don't realise it till it's late,' Demetra uttered.

'Unless they're so poor that they are ready to do anything to earn a few pounds,' Marcus added and switched to another channel.

'Wow, it looks like we're in the butcher's shop,' he laughed. Demetra turned her head and screamed terrified. The camera focused on the surgeon's knife cutting thick pieces of fat from the flanks of the patient lying on the operation table.

'I told you, it does not get better. It's a program about a surgical removal of extra fat from an obese woman,' he explained.

'Stop. I don't want to hear anything about obese. I don't want to lose my appetite.'

'How sensitive we are! If they show such programs during dinnertime it means one of two things: either British don't have any dinner, or their stomachs are so strong that such views don't disturb them.'

'Or they don't watch the TV at all,' she added.

'Good point,' he agreed and switched again to another channel. This time it was History program about Cromwell and his victories over the English was just for them.

It was late when Demetra finished tightening up the kitchen and sat next to Marcus drinking her last cup of tea before retiring, when the phone rang. They looked at each other afraid to speak, and wondered to pick up the receiver or not. It rang again and again.

'Let it go,' Marcus signed to her and squeezed her hand. Demetra nodded to him in agreement. At last the ringing stopped. They silently went to bed, wondering who had tried to reach them and why.

'Don't think too much about that ringing.' Marcus slightly moved his head toward the phone. 'There are many crazy people here who enjoy harassing others.' He comforted her, hoping the following day would bring something good for a change.

Chapter 30

The bell woke them up. Demetra slightly lifted her head and looked at the clock. It was eight o'clock. To her surprise, she slept good and felt refreshed. Next to her, Marcus stirred.

'Someone is ringing our bell. It's eight o'clock,' she whispered, moving closer to him.

'I wonder who that could be. I'll answer the bell,' he reluctantly offered.

'Please do,' she muttered staying close to him. The bell rang again.

'It looks like I have to.' He slowly rose from the bed and went to the entrance door.

Looking through the peephole, he saw a uniformed man.

'What do you want?' Marcus briskly asked.

'There's a registered pack for you, sir.'

'Leave it with the porter?'

'Yes, sir. But you must sign it before.'

'Leave it downstairs. I'll collect it later,' Marcus repeated and returned to the bedroom.

'Who was it?' Demetra turned to face him.

'Nothing special. The postman brought us a parcel. Maybe he means good, but we can't be sure after yesterday.'

'What do you mean? Parcel? I didn't order anything by mail. Did you?'

'Why would I? I have everything that I need. I don't care for mail-order anyway.'

'God Gracious! What will become of us? I'm afraid.' Demetra panicked, hiding her head under the pillow.

'There is nothing to be afraid of.' He walked around the bed and sat on its edge. 'Look at me.' Demetra reluctantly lifted the pillow just enough for him to see her eyes.

'What are you afraid of? We're not in Karsland; we're freer here then there.'

'Do you think so? Over four hundred times per day being caught on CCTV with the excuse of security. Or lack of police on the streets. All those variegated people walking on London streets. I'm afraid of them. Their clothes, language, manners are different from ours. Where are the Europeans? White race with traditions and customs similar to mine?'

'Don't get desperate!'

'I have nothing against those people. I'm sure they're nice and mannered their own way, but they're aliens to me. You've never told me that England is a non-white country. I want to go home.' Demetra began to cry. Marcus was taken aback. He reached for her cheek and tenderly stroked it, not knowing how to calm her down, nor to help. Demetra cried louder. The bell rang again.

'Don't open that door. Don't.' She was hysterical now, shivering violently.

'I'm not going to. Let me see who's there.' He rose again and went to the door. This time he saw the black porter together with the postman.

'What do you want?' Marcus curtly asked.

'Sir, here is a registered pack for you. It's a special delivery. I cannot sign it for you.'

'Alright. Sign it for me now, and drop it there.'

'Yes, sir.' Through the peephole, Marcus watched the porter signing the receipt and taking a thick, brown envelope from the postman. Then he slipped it through the mail hole on the right side of the door. Marcus picked it up at once.

'Thanks. I've got it.' He said and returned to the bedroom where curious Demetra was sitting in bed, waiting for him.

'Nothing special. Just our mail,' he assured her lifting his hand to show her a big envelope. It was addressed to her. The return address was the Cambridge University, Engineering Department. She held her breath. The envelope was thick, large and au-

thentic. She looked at it for a long time, not rushing to open it. She tried to remember if the Cambridge University was on her list for a prospective employment. And she knew it was not.

'I don't think I've sent my inquiry for an employment with the Cambridge. I'm sure I didn't. We aren't planning to move out of London, are we?' She lifted her eyes to Marcus's and saw that his expression had suddenly changed.

'Didn't you?' He half-asked, half-confirmed, quickly snatching the envelope and ran to the hall in pyjamas as he was. He roughly pulled the door and leaving it open, he disappeared from her sight. She heard him running along the corridor, and then it was silence again.

Demetra had had so many surprises recently that she began to wonder again if she was right refusing Barbò status. She didn't know what to think about Marcus's behaviour but she was sure he had a reason for it. The loud sound of a Christmas cracker interrupted her thoughts and almost at the same time Marcus entered the flat and firmly shut the door behind him. He secured it on all locks. She saw his face burning red, he grabbed for air, his eyes shined, and all his appearance was so different from usual. She never saw him agitated as such.

'What's happened? The envelope?' She raised her eyebrows noticing his hands are empty.

'The envelope? Are you still unaware of what's going on?' At last he managed to say between his gaps for air.

'How can I know what's going on here. I don't understand… I thought I knew this country, their language and… But…'

'Well, did you hear the loud bang?' He sat on the edge of the bed and after a long pause he added: 'It was your envelope. Inside of it there was a hand-made bomb. Someone is determined to get rid of you.'

'Me? What did I do wrong?' Demetra was shattered by his words.

'I guess you have something that someone wants at any cost.'

He said then; noting her terrified face, he gently added: 'Don't worry. I'll take care of you. Let me think on what we should do from now on.' Demetra burst into tears. Back home she knew what to do in case of danger, but here she felt hopeless.

'First of all, let us have our breakfast and then we will see what we will do next.' His words were lost in the loud sound of a siren.

'Police arrived at last.' He pointed out lifting his eyebrows. 'How long it took them to come here? Five? Ten minutes?' They heard loud voices, commotion on the street but decided not to come out on the balcony. They dressed up, had breakfast, trying to behave as nothing had happened to them. But all that time Marcus listened to the sounds, reaching them and tried to figure out what was going on in the building.

At half past ten they were still discussing on what to do next when the bell rang again, third time that morning. Without delay, Marcus went to open the door. In front of him were two men dressed in black long leather coats and uniform caps.

'Mr Vanderson? Flat B2?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'May we come in?' asked one of them and without waiting for permission both men entered the flat. Marcus shrugged his shoulders and closed the door behind the intruders.

'Is something wrong?' Demetra asked, keeping her place on the sofa.

At the sight of the two strange men, she got up from her seat and stood in the doorframe of the kitchen, questionably looking at them.

'We've uninvited visitors, my dear. These gentlemen have some questions for us or maybe some answers. I don't know yet.' Marcus smiled to her. Catching her eyes, he signed to her to be calm. One of the men retrieved from his pocket his identity card.

'My name is Kenneth Huck. I'm Inspector of HM Police. These are my credentials. We have some questions for you.' He glanced around the room as of waiting to be seated. Not getting the offer,

the newcomers continued to stand. Marcus took his seat on the sofa, nodding to Demetra to do the same. She did.

A complete silence fell into the room; the only sounds were those coming from the street. Then the tall man began. 'At 8:22 am hand-made bomb, small, 200g exploded in the rubbish bin in the basement of this building. We have been called in. As our investigation went on, we checked CCTV tapes and found out that you, Mr Vanderson, at 8:21 briskly walked with a big envelope in your hand in the direction of the staircase where a cabbage shaft is located. Then we saw that you're running back without the envelope, and almost at the same time at 8:22, the explosion occurred. Could you explain to us why have you been there and why you didn't have the envelope on the way back?'

Demetra's face paled. She clearly saw there was no way to hide something there. It's all the same again. They're watched in all places, even in their own building. I wonder if they have no scruples to watch them inside the flat, in the bedroom, she thought, covertly glancing at her husband and waiting for his reply. She didn't wait long. The angry explosion hit the room.

'And what? What right do you have to come to my flat without a warrant questioning me? I'm not obliged to answer to any of your questions without my lawyer present and without your warrant. Get out from here,' Marcus shouted. His face distorted from the fury of wrath and disgust. At first the officers seemed to have been taken aback, but very soon they recovered.

'Well, we'll be back with a proper authority. Don't think you're going to get rid of us so easily.'

'I'm sure I won't. But I've nothing to do with you. I'm a private citizen and I'm entitled to do whatever I want. If I want to throw away my mail, you cannot stop me from doing it.'

'You're admitting you've thrown a big envelope into the cabbage shaft, aren't you? The porter identified you and the envelope on CCTV.'

'I'm not admitting anything. I have no comment and I won't

speak with you without my lawyer present. Good day.' Marcus stood up and left the room. Demetra continued to sit silently waiting for what would be next. One of the men turned to her but the next moment he shrugged his shoulders. They exchanged glances and without a word, left the flat quickly and quietly making Demetra wonder if she had not dreamed the entire scene.

'They left, haven't they?' Marcus was back. He looked as usual, calm, serious and contented.

'Yes, they have.' Demetra absently answered still trying to put her thoughts together and pushed farther in the back of her mind the worries about the future.

'I know they'll send for us to the police station. Hell with them. I completely forgot about CCTV. But who could have thought they're installed in each corridor? We're not in a hotel. It looks like there is more spread supervision here than in Karsland.' He said but glancing at Demetra he added. 'Don't worry. It's nothing. We did nothing wrong. They wanted to know about terrorists. They're curious about us, and want to know who's interested to get rid of you, or maybe me. That's all,' he laughed.

'And now? We must do something today. Something.' Demetra seemed totally confused.

'Let's have a short walk. Fresh air, the sun and a nice lunch in Pizza Place will do us well, improve our mood and wits. Let's go now.' She smiled, gladly accepting his offer: it was an escape from the morning's nightmare.

* * *

'It was your best idea to have lunch out.' Demetra's contented voice made Marcus happy.

'I bet after such *pizza* we can digest everything, including the police.' He laughed turning the key in the lock and opening the door wide for her to step in.

'I'll make coffee at once.' She dropped her handbag on the nearest chair and went directly to the kitchen.

'We have having some messages. Let's listen to them.' She

heard the press of the button, click on connection and voice announcing the messages.

'You'll tell me later. I cannot leave the coffee maker.' She heard some voices but it was too far to hear its contents.

'Well, who was it?' With the coffee tray in her hands, Demetra entered the room.

'Listen to it.' Marcus replied and switched on the answering machine.

'Mr and Mrs Vanderson, you're requested to be present at the Central Police Station tomorrow at ten o'clock. Have your passports with you.'

'Mrs Vanderson, I'm calling on behalf of 'Goldberg, Muller and Rickchild' company. We would like to set an appointment with you for a job interview. If you're interested please call us during normal business hours.' The tape stopped.

'Wake up, baby. Drink your coffee. It'll get cold.' Marcus laughed at her. Demetra sat looking into one point. She had difficulty to digest the news.

'I cannot figure out how and why did they get my name and telephone number. I didn't contact that company. I'm sure of it.'

'I've heard all these employment agencies are connected between each other. I'm sure they've got your name from one of them.'

'I cannot believe I can get a job, especially after all this talk about age and entry level. Do you remember that awful man in that awful office? He treated me as I'm an old imbecile,' Demetra complained.

'Forget about it. Think about the interview and prepare your conversation. Try to sound native English,' he instructed her.

'Coffee is cold.' Demetra grimaced sipping from her cup.

'I told you.' Marcus picked up his cup and emptied in one gulp. 'Delicious.'

'I can't believe it.' Demetra automatically answered; all her thoughts were on hope to get some job at last. She was sick and

tired of being home, cooking and cleaning, not mentioning about her illness. She needed to work since it was her life. She was brought up to work.

* * *

The tall hi-rise building stood apart from the others. It was impressive. The huge rotating sign 'New Scotland Yard' announced their destination. Built in the time of progress expansion, it was rebuild once after the fire and later on new several wings were added. Its monumental size and height were significant and important in the past and used as means of oppression of the citizens. Demetra was not new to such "monuments". Karsland was full of them, starting from the building of the State Committee.

They entered the Visitor's entrance and went directly to the 'Information desk'. Uniformed guard blocked their way demanding their names.

'Mr and Mrs Vanderson? This way, please.' To their big surprise, the guard smiled to them and quickly escorted them to the first floor. He knocked on one of the doors and opened it without waiting for permission and stepped aside to let them in.

They found themselves in a big room, barren of everything except a long table in the middle of the room with several chairs placed around it. The short man dressed in impeccable suit sat at the head of the table. He said in a soft low voice: 'Good morning. You can sit down here.'

'Thanks.' Marcus said and took the seat. Demetra nodded and sat next to her husband. A complete silence filled the room.

'It's an interrogation room,' the thought ran in her brain, spotting herself in the big mirror that took the half wall. 'And I'm again involved with law and police.' The goose skin ran down her spine. She'll be damned before she showed to that noxious man her fears. She straitened her back and stared at the mirror in front of her.

With cold arrogance Marcus looked directly at the man.

'We've invited you here just to ask you a few questions.' The officer started with a friendly smile. 'There are no strings attached

to your answers. You could have brought your lawyer with you. Although, I can see you haven't. Usually, one invited by us comes with his lawyer.'

'We wouldn't have come at all, unless we'll get a written court order. We came to say to you to leave us in peace. We're new to this country, as you well know. We're law-abiding citizen and nothing more.' Marcus interrupted him angrily.

'I have no doubts about you being 'law-abiding'.' The sarcasm was in man's voice. 'You're been here just over two weeks and already someone wants to get rid of you. We know all about your past. You're troublemakers and were exiled from your motherland. We're the greatest country of all, generous and open to help. When you had nowhere to go, we took you in and gave you our citizenship, and everything connected to it. And you? Are you already backing on your tricks?' The man stopped and looked gloomy at them.

'Tricks? For what?' Marcus twisted his lips. 'You know very well that we have had nothing to do with yesterday's incident. We know nothing on why someone sent us that envelope. It was our luck that my wife remembered she didn't send her resume to the Cambridge University, and I was fast enough to get rid of it. Otherwise, we wouldn't be seating here in front of you today.' Marcus pointed out to him. His angry words echoed in the room. He looked, as he was ready for a fight with eyes shining, red face burning and hands clutched into fists. Demetra put her hand on his arm but he shook it off. She cast down her eyes to her hands, which she held on her lap. Her face blushed. She was very uncomfortable wanting to be anywhere but there.

She didn't dare to move or to lift her eyes to see what was going on. She heard the calm voice of the investigator replying to her husband.

'I know it. This is why we've invited you here. We hope you can help us. You may know something that we don't.' Demetra thought his voice lost some of its coolness. It was almost comforting.

'Since you've insisted on knowing nothing, I have no other chance as to believe to you.' The man added.

At this moment Demetra got all her courage to look at him. Her eyes met with his. The man's eyes were light gray, cold eyes radiating high intellect and deep knowledge.

He's no dummy, Demetra thought, getting relaxed. She was sure now that that man would take his time to study the situation before accusing them of some wrong doings.

Again, the silence fell in the room. Marcus didn't speak anymore. The man seemed to study them both. It was a strange scene. Demetra noticed the officer's fashionable two-piece dark-gray suit with pinkish fine cotton shirt and latest fashion tie. In her eyes, he could have been anyone, a businessman, entrepreneur, manager, or even a lawyer but not a policeman. She came to the conclusion that he had to be a big shot. Even with her limited knowledge of British life, she knew a regular officer could never afford such an expensive suit for everyday use.

With the angle of her eye she glanced at her husband who sat straight and motionless. On his tight-lipped face, Demetra read the defiance to everything and everyone. It felt as being locked into some box from where was no exit. The silence was charged with dynamite that could explode at the slightest stroke of movement. She sensed she was witnessing a battle of wills where someone had to step aside to prevent a clash. Who would it be?

'You're right, we cannot hold you here. There is no base for a detention. But I'm warning you, you'll be watched closely and in case of a second accident similar to this one, we'll be forced to detain you on the ground of terrorism.' To her big surprise, the officer was the first to give up.

'Terrorism? What it has to do with us? You cannot label us as such. Yes, we're involved in the revolt back in our home country, but it has nothing to do with international matters. Jihad which you're fighting is over four centuries old. It's not our fault you're not able to stop it. Anyway, you never could, as long as your country is full of varie-

gated races, nationalities and customs.' Marcus abruptly stopped. The officer didn't reply, just his eyelids blinked more rapidly for a few seconds. He couldn't, Demetra figured it out.

'I'm going to ignore your last statement considering you're not familiar with our laws yet. But I am warning you that if you will repeat these words, I will be forced to detain you on Race and Hate Law. Your words are strongly disapproving of our system and country and you will be prosecuted for that.' The man sounded harsh and stern, making Demetra wondering if they would ever see their flat again. Her fears were groundless.

'You can leave now. Good day.' The officer suddenly barked at them and quickly stood up from his seat. It was so unexpected that both of them just followed his example astonished, still not believing they were free to leave.

'Arrogance! You've noticed he didn't bother to present himself to us. I don't believe we'll ever get free of them. They're going to ruin our life with their moles and cameras.' Marcus said as they left the building.

'It looks like we're back in Karsland. I don't see any difference anymore.' Demetra sadly replied, wondering again if the life of a Barbò would have been better than their present situation.

'Forget about it. Let's go to Peter Jones.' Marcus suggested. 'I want to see their collection of classic music.' They took a taxi, but alighted on Brompton Street, decided to walk to the store. As they strolled on old Brompton Street near corner with Draycott Avenue, a cab stopped just a few meters from them. The door opened wide and a young girl of about twenty jumped out of it, ran behind the cab and began to vomit. It was a revolting scene. The other girl came out of the cab carrying the shoes and a small handbag, presumably, of the sick girl. Demetra stood and watched the girl who stopped vomiting, taking her bag, opening it and retrieving some kind of cloth from there, wiped her mouth and quickly glanced around her. Noting Demetra staring at her, the girl lifted her chin haughty. With an arrogant expression on

her face, she turned away as nothing happened. She took her shoes but didn't put them on, just carried them in her hand. Both girls re-entered the cab which sped away.

'I guess it's part of British customs to vomit on the streets.' Demetra slowly said. As a woman, she felt shame for that girl and was very uncomfortable in front of her husband.

'You should get used to such matters. When I saw it during my first visit here, I felt the same as you. But now I take it as everybody around here. Don't pay attention to such small things.' He comforted poor Demetra who was ready to burst into tears.

As to increase her sufferance, they were over passed by a pair of English girls walking barefooted on the dirty pavement littered with spits, chewing gum and rat's droppings and carrying their high-heeled open-toed shoes in hand. Demetra just looked at their bare feet in amazement. Marcus heartily laughed at her.

'And now? You're not only shocked but even speechless. I envy your naivety.' Marcus took his wife by her shoulders and whispered into her ear. 'There are two reasons for these girls to walk barefooted. First of all, they are preserving their expensive purchase by carrying those shoes in their hands. Those poor creatures paid a fortune for them. They are *Manuel Mark*'s, one of the most desirable shoes for young girls but also one of the most expensive. Secondly, they are displaying the designer's tag for everybody to look at them. It is a kind of a show-off.'

'Maybe you're correct in your explanation, but I could never understand how those girls could care more about theirs designer's shoes than for their health. You know well as I do, that just a small cut on the foot could have them in hospital with hepatitis A, B or C, or MSR, or any other virus depending on what discarded syringe of some drug addict or rat's droppings, which you can see now in front of you.' Demetra said, looking down at her feet.

'Forget about it. Let's move or we will never reach Peter Jones.'

'I don't feel like going there anymore.' Demetra whispered to him.

'Oh, no. I won't let you get sick over those stupid girls. They are brainless, uneducated brats who know nothing better than to get themselves into trouble due to overspending on fashionable clothes and accessories, excessive drinking and mixing up with the wrong type of men.'

* * *

As our newcomers were walking slowly in the direction of Peter Jones and discussing the queer customs of Londoners, none of them noticed the cab following each of their steps. Inside of it, a fat, short man sprawled on soft pillows drinking Martini, without removing his eyes from the couple.

Armand Green was the right-hand of Bert Blank, or better to say of Gilbert Conrad Issel Blank, who was one of the leading figures in banking world in the City. But no one could ever imagine the other leading role that Bert Blank was in charge of. He was the President of the London branch of the famous Spider Group, which was the most secretive organisation ever existed, with headquarters in Zurich, Switzerland.

What was the Spider Group? It was an organisation having the main aim to accumulate the wealth of the World for them. If they would be common people, they could be called different names. But being bankers, industrialists, merchants and numerous professionals and etc., those people were called the Brain Force of the World.

Armand Green was a common man who didn't care for anything but himself and his family's comfort. He worked for Bert for over twenty years, doing any dirty job which his boss didn't care for. Armand didn't mind his position, since his salary was excellent and he was quite well off. His gold Rolex and his wife's and both of his children's were testimony to it. He never asked any questions, not even to himself, on what kind of business Bert was in. He never cared about it as long as he was paid for his services.

When his boss ordered him to watch that young couple around the clock, he just asked one question. 'Do I need to watch them at

night?' His boss laughed heartily: 'When they are going to sleep, you are free to go home too. Just remember to be back on your watch in the morning. Let's say at eight. I don't think they will come out before then.'

'Sorry, I didn't mean to…' Armand began. But Bert waved to him, dismissing his talk.

It was his third day of guard and he was getting bored, sitting in the vehicle and watching after them. The driver was his partner, with whom he had done many jobs. They discussed the latest soccer match between Fulham and Liverpool, listened to the latest news on the radio but time still moved very slowly. It was still early in the day and in front was the full day. 'Have patience! It's one of the biggest virtues that pay highest returns.' His mother continuously repeated to him. He wished she was alive today so that he could tell her how right she was.

'They've entered into Peter Jones. What do we do now? There are at least six exits. How can we know which one they'll use?' Driver asked.

'I'm sure they'll use the back one which is closest to their street. Let's stop near the service entrance. It's the best for us.' Armand replied, leaning on his back.

'Yes, boss.' Driver smiled and slowly began to move.

'I guess I might take a nap. They spent at least two hours there. Tell me when you'll see them again.' Armand closed his eyes. He didn't care for a spying work, but it was a part of his duties and he took it as he had to.

Chapter 31

The next day the Vandersons were facing the tall building again, but for a completely different matter. They were in the centre of the City, the heart of London's business for many centuries. It seemed as being left there, in the middle of the nineteenth century, with the typical intricate rococo architecture and Victorian touch of display of riches. They stopped in front of the massive wooden door, elaborately carved. On the right side of the door, on a bronze plate, was engraved 'Goldberg, Muller and Rickchild Ltd., established in 1796.' Demetra nervously glanced at Marcus.

'It's only the sign. Have courage!' He slightly pushed her to the door. Then he pulled to open it. The heavy door moved easily revealing a second one, identical. They pushed that too and found themselves in the entrance hall. It was impressive how all companies could afford to display their wealth without being afraid to be questioned about it.

The ceiling was very high and huge crystal chandeliers hang from it. There were wooden panels covered walls and between them there were paintings created by the old masters. The dark, old, wooden floor was covered with a thick dark red carpet. Few high-back heavy chairs were placed around, in case somebody needed to rest.

'Do you need some help?' The tall man haughtily asked them.

'We have an appointment with Mr Mel Sharon.' Marcus replied, coolly.

'Could you wait for a moment, please?' The tall man said and almost at once disappeared behind one of the doors which ran on the right side. He reappeared with a servile smile.

'Mr Sharon's secretary told me they're waiting for you, Mrs Vanderson.' He stated, looking at Demetra and completely ig-

noring Marcus. 'Second floor, Room 203. Let me show you to the lift.' The man ran forward her.

The door of the Room 203 was opened wide. The platinum blonde in the little black dress sat at the desk placed directly across the entrance. They went in.

'Mrs Vanderson, we're waiting for you. Mr Vanderson?' The blonde was all smiles.

'Good morning. I'm Demetra Vanderson. I've a...' the woman didn't let her finish the sentence: 'Mr Sharon is waiting for you. I'll show you the way.'

'You can wait for your wife in here.' She dropped over her shoulder to Marcus.

'That's all about British manners.' Demetra thought following her escort.

They went to the corridor, turned right and after a short walk stopped in front of a closed door. There was a bronze plate and Demetra read: Dr Melvin B. Sharon, PhD, Intelligent Systems Design and Development, Manager. The secretary knocked on the door. At the hearing 'Come in', she turned a highly polished handle and pushed the door.

At the sight of the interior and especially at the sight of the man sitting at the desk, Demetra paused shocked. Momentarily, she thought she was back in Karsland.

The small virile man rose quickly from his armchair and practically ran toward them.

'Mrs Vanderson, nice to meet you. I'm Mel Sharon.' He stretched his both hands to take Demetra's and shook it for a several seconds, then suddenly dropped it down.

'You can go, Deborah. Thanks.' He quickly dropped to the blonde and to Demetra:

'Please take a seat.' She turned to the visitor's chair in front of his desk.

'No, not there. It's more comfortable here.' He pointed to his left. There was a black leather sofa; two matching armchairs

were placed around a glass coffee table resting on a marble stand. Demetra hesitated not being sure that was proper for a work interview, but she had no means to know it. She boldly went forward and sank into a black armchair. She hated the colour black and regarded it as unlucky for her.

'How about some coffee?' Mel Sharon winked at her.

'No, thanks.' Demetra blushed, not knowing what to do next.

'Mrs Vanderson,' his voice was low and ingratiating, making Demetra wish to runaway, 'our department is expanding. We're acquiring new, more sophisticated equipment and we need a specialist with big experience who doesn't need any training to work with such equipment. We have got your curriculum from 'Chaplin & Chaplin Consultants' who recommended you as the right person for us. You've recently arrived from Karsland, haven't you? Oh, what a beautiful country! I wish I could spend there my yearly vacation.' Demetra listened to the little man and had difficulty to believe she was in London.

Mr Sharon looked like the twin brother of Mr Albert Issel, the President of the State Committee in Karsland. The boyish behaviour, small eyes and expensive suit and most of all, the diamond pin to keep the tie in the place. Everything was identical. Her head began to spin. She was silent, trying to figure out the meaning of his words and manners.

'I would like to hear from you about your previous position.' Demetra heard him as from faraway. She forced herself to push aside all troublesome thoughts and concentrate on her answers.

'I was in charge of one of the departments in the industrial plant which produced new clothes for Ladies.' She began.

'I know all about it.' He interrupted her and continued: 'You were in charge of computer design-in-the-art patterns, weren't you? And you were responsible for the software part, am I right?' He stopped. Demetra nodded, wondering if a job interview was so simple why everyone was worrying about it.

'As I've mentioned before, we're acquiring new equipment and we need a software specialist to create new software.'

'I know the latest twenty two languages of software and I can use any of these as required.'

'I am sure you can.' Mel Sharon said in his low insinuating voice, which Demetra could not stand already.

'Very well, I can see you're an ideal candidate for the opening position.' Demetra was speechless.

Everything was unreal there. The office, with a few exceptions, could be an exact copy of the State Committee offices. In front of her there was Mr Mel Sharon, looking and speaking as Mr Albert Issel. There was the sun beating directly into her eyes through the drawn curtains.

'Thank you for coming today. We'll contact you with our final decision in a few days' time.' He smiled and rose from his seat. Reaching his desk, he pressed the button on its left and almost at once the blonde reappeared. Demetra got impression that the secretary was waiting outside the door in the corridor.

'Please show Mrs Vanderson the way, Deborah.' He nodded to her.

'See you soon.' He smiled to Demetra. Both women stepped into the corridor and the door closed firmly behind them.

* * *

'Are you still pondering your interview?' Marcus asked Demetra, noting her serious face.

'Yes, I do.' They were in their flat, having coffee after their lunch.

'Is something wrong? You didn't like the place or the man? What's disturbing you? Ever since we're back, you've been so quiet. Tell me what's worrying you.' He moved closer to her, pulling her into his arms. Demetra hid her face on his chest and stayed silent wondering if to tell him what she thought about Mel Sharon and his office.

'Tell me everything, my love.' He insisted, pulling her tighter to his body. 'I know you don't like something. You cannot hide it

from me. We're friends and friends don't have secrets, do they?' Demetra continued her silence but Marcus sensed some change in her. He patiently waited.

'First of all, I've no secrets for you.' She began. 'Today I found myself in such a strange, unreal, or better to say, paranormal situation that I just don't know how to take it. Of course, I'm going to tell you everything about my interview but I just don't know how you'll take it. I don't like to be treated as half-mad.' She said at last and freeing herself from his arms, she lifted her head and looked into his eyes. There she saw his love and concern about her, which broke her last doubts.

'Alright, I'll tell you everything but take it seriously. Don't laugh at me.' She finally decided and began her story from the moment she entered Mr Sharon's office.

She told him about the astonishing resemblance of the later office with manager offices of the State Committee and about the remarkable resemblance of the man to Albert Issel, and above all about his questioning of her and even more disturbing was his insinuating voice which she could not stand. She didn't forget about the diamond tie pin, identical to Mr Issel's.

If she thought Marcus would laugh at her, she would have been greatly mistaken. As she proceeded with her story, his face began to change from casual curious expression to serious, then to concern, gloomy, angry and to tough at last. There was no sign of being laughed at her. She stopped her story and looked at him, waiting for his reply. The room was silent; the wall clock was counting seconds. From the street the usual sounds could be heard but Marcus was still mute.

'And what?' She lost her patience at his silence.

'I guess you're right. It's a surreal story. I have no comments. Let's wait for his decision. We'll go on from that.' His reply was non-committed.

'Don't you think it was strange to find identical furnishings, and…' Demetra began but he stopped her in the sign language.

'Let me think about your story. We'll speak about it later.' His reaction surprised her so much that she didn't insist on going on.

Briskly, she rose from the sofa and picking up the coffee tray went to the kitchen. Putting it on the counter, she glanced outside. Everything was there as usual: the street was deserted at that time of the day, except for occasional passer-by. The sun was directly into her eyes, since their flat faced the West. The wind moved the palm leaves creating the cracking sound which became so familiar to her. Glancing at the well-known scenery, she had difficulty to believe that her morning interview with Mel Sharon was the real thing. 'I must forget about it. Let things go as they are supposed to. It's a beautiful quiet place. There is nothing to worry about.' She said to herself and putting rubber gloves on began to wash the dirty dishes.

She would not be so relaxed if she could read the inner thoughts of her husband, who sprawled on the sofa and pensively looked into the ceiling.

'I'll be damned if I'm wrong. But I don't think so. At last, after so many years of hearing and wondering if it was the truth, I can say that Spider Group exists and London is its nest. Or maybe somewhere else and in London there's just its branch.' Marcus thought satisfactory. He had no doubts they had interest in them, maybe only in Demetra but for sure only Spider Group could have had the courage and impetuosity to try to get rid of them using a hand-made bomb. The means and ways are theirs; there is no uncertainty about it. Today's distasteful interview with that Mel Sharon, who knew she could recognise at once Karsland's surroundings, had shown as someone who was desperate to get closer to Demetra, but for what reason? It was a big dilemma which Marcus had to try to solve as soon as possible, unless he'll be risking losing his wife.

Demetra must know nothing about those things until everything would have been cleared and solved. But how? He didn't know but one thing was for sure: Spider Group existed and Mel

Sharon was a part of it and Demetra was in danger. Marcus vowed to himself he would protect her from anyone who'll try to hurt her. He knew it was an impossible task but nothing was wrong in his attempt.

* * *

It took Mel Sharon just two days to decide on offering her the position of software specialist with hundred thousand pounds annual salary and ask her to start on the following Monday. Demetra could not wait for Monday to come. At last it did.

She rose early to get herself ready. Then she prepared some breakfast for both of them.

'Marcus, everything is ready. Coffee is getting cold.' She called. He entered. Silently taking his place, he kept his glance away from hers. The gloomy expression was on his face.

'Is something wrong?' Demetra could not comprehend his attitude. 'You're not happy about my job. I can see it,' she stated. Her good mood began gradually to evaporate.

'I have my doubts about that place. It's not what it seems.' Marcus replied, cautiously.

'There is nothing wrong with it.' She sounded irritated. 'I'm a specialist with many years of experience. They're offering me this job because they know I'm good at it. They've got some reference on my previous work.'

'Oh, yes. Robert Young or Odin Bachter would have been happy to do it.' Marcus said, sarcastically.

'I don't care to know why they've accepted me. What counts is that I'm employed from now on and I'll bring some money to our family.'

'Oh, yes. Everything comes down to the money.'

'Didn't you tell me that soon we'll be destitute of cash?'

'Well, I did, but all this quickness with this job makes me wonder about who's behind it,' Marcus added.

'Nobody except 'Chaplin & Chaplin Consultants.'

'Don't you think the sum of hundred thousand pounds sounds

like a bribe? The majority of British professionals earn round twenty five or thirty thousand per year. Even engineers get on average fifty thousand only.'

'I'm good at my work. They've decided I'm worth of that money. Don't forget they're in the City. I don't see it as a big income. My handbag costs nine hundred pounds, not mentioning my coat.' Demetra contradicted him.

'Ah, I've got your message. You want to live as WAG. I've underestimated you. You're much faster adapting to this corrupted society than I thought you would.'

'Don't speak nonsense. I'm not corrupted by anything or anybody. But I found out I like to have designer things. They give me security and peace of mind.'

'It's a false security which brought many to the ruins. I hope you're not going to get into the habit of paying by credit cards. I must tell you at once I'm not going to tolerate throwing money out of the window.' His voice rose to the loud.

'Millions of British people have this habit, as you call it, and still laughing and enjoying their lives as you can see for yourself.' She retorted.

'Fool's paradise.' He cut her short. Standing up, he dropped his napkin on the table and walked out of the sitting room.

It was the first time ever since they had known each other that they have got into such bitter argument. Demetra was hurt by his words. She felt he didn't believe into her possibilities to do a highly qualified job. It was ridiculous of him to think there was something behind of all that. He couldn't think Mel Sharon could have some interest in me, she thought. It's so stupid of him. She picked up her small handbag, put it on across her body, took her flat briefcase and stopped in front of the mirror hoping Marcus would step into, wishing her good luck on her first working day. He didn't.

She waited for a few more minutes. Then she decided to go to him.

He lay on the bed, on top of the coverlet, his eyes closed.

'Let's be friends. We cannot argue now that we're in the foreign land. I joked. I promise you, I'll never have any cards, debit or credit, in my life. I'll listen to you.' Bending to him, she lightly kissed his cheek.

Swiftly, he seized her into his arms and pulled her to him. She fell on top of him. He moved his arms slowly caressing her back, shoulders and then held her head with both of his hands. Bringing her face close to his, he looked into her eyes searching for her real answer. Demetra boldly met his eyes and they looked at each other for a long time. They spoke without words. Then Marcus lifted his head and kissed her fiery, urgently as telling her 'I care for you and I love you more than my life.' She met his kisses with the same fire as replying 'I'll always be yours, because I love you too.'

He let her go at last. 'Go, fix your make-up. You must be impeccable today. Don't worry, I'll watch over you. No one would hurt you. Go.' He abruptly pushed her away. 'You cannot be late on your first day of work,' he added, smiling.

Demetra smiled back; unexpectedly realising she didn't want to leave him alone for a full day. She thought of telling him about it, but then changed her mind. Who knows he may take it seriously and she'll be locked at home forever to cook and clean as a Barbò. Not those chores. She rose on her feet and went to the dresser.

'It needs just a few touches,' she said after studying her face carefully. Quickly, she fixed the damages.

'I must run now. I'll call you as soon as I can. See you at dinner,' she smiled at him.

'Waiting for your call. Have a nice day!' He replied, staying in bed. She blew him a kiss and left.

After closing the door, Demetra turned to the right, to the stairs. As she was passing, the second door across their flat opened and the old lady stepped out almost colliding with her.

'Sorry.' Demetra apologised.

'I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't see you're passing by.' The old lady replied in a feeble voice. Demetra smiled at her, feeling happy and generous.

'Hurry, don't lose your precious time with me. I see you're going to…' the lady glanced at Demetra's briefcase.

'To the office.' Demetra smiled. 'To work.' She added.

'In this case, run. We'll see each other some other time. I hope the weather will be nice today. It's pity if it will rain again, my dear.' The old lady switched to the subject beloved by all British – weather.

'Good day.' Demetra greeted her and ran away. She didn't feel like losing her time over speaking about the weather. It's for British, she thought, quickly descending stairs.

'Good morning, ma'am.' The big black porter opened the door for her.

'Good morning.' She replied without looking at him. She never wanted to meet his eyes. From that first night on their arrival, his huge, robust figure clad in the black uniform made her feel supervised and watched. If she would have been superstitious, she could have said he's bringing her bad luck. But not being so, he just gave her creeps. She passed him fast.

She stopped for a second to inhale the fresh morning air. Whoever said that London was humid, foggy and gloomy was just making up stories. London had the best climate of many European cities and, for sure, of Karsland's.

She briskly walked toward Sloane Square when suddenly she found her way blocked. The sidewalk was narrow in that section and two women, each with a pram, were waiting for a bus. One stood parallel to the road and the other across the walkway. The young, thin, olive-skinned woman held the handles of the pram, which forced Demetra to stop.

'Could you please move the pram?' Demetra politely asked, gesturing her direction. The woman glanced haughty at her.

'Could you please move the pram?' Demetra repeated her re-

quest. This time the woman unwillingly moved it just to open a passage of approximately twenty centimetres.

'Sorry, it's not enough for me to pass.' Demetra friendly smiled.

Abruptly, the woman turned the pram by ninety degrees, placing it alongside the wall. At such unexpected movement, the baby got frightened and began to cry. Instead of comforting the baby, the woman turned her face to Demetra, distorted by anger.

'I don't like the way you talk to me. You're rude and insolent,' she screamed. The wind blew her afro-style hair, making her look as some kind of infuriated creature.

'You're the one who is being insolent.' Demetra replied, taken aback by such display of hate and resentment. 'You've blocked the walkway with your pram. Not me.'

'You're a racist! You're a hater!' The woman continued to shout at Demetra who passed swiftly and hurried away suppressing her wish to argue.

Demetra knew up to then that it was usual for Londoners to attack and offend someone, unfairly. That was their way to hide their own wrong doings. The high tense atmosphere was the normal condition there. Behind "Sorry" and "Excuse me" was hidden profound hate, unhappiness, dissatisfaction with one's life and social status.

On any other day she would have been upset and would brood over that incident, but not that day. She was so happy to go to work that nothing could ruin her good mood. Anyway, she was already getting used to such things. Local people, so called white British Anglo-Saxon, treated those things as small matters without paying attention to them at all.

Chapter 32

With a quivering heart, Demetra pulled the entrance door of the formidable 'Goldberg, Muller and Rickchild Ltd.'

'Good morning.' She greeted the platinum blonde, Deborah, who presided at her desk already.

'Oh, you're so early.' She seemed embarrassed. Only then Demetra noticed the opened bag and make-up case that were on the desk in front of the woman. She was applying some emulsion to her cheeks.

'I must start at 9:30, mustn't I?' Demetra was annoyed at such low-key reception. For her, who was brought up on impeccable manners in Karsland, to be seen while applying make-up was regarded as one of the worst manners. But it seemed that there in London it was quite acceptable.

'I can try to find Mr Sharon's office by myself.' She offered.

'Could you? It's so nice of you. Do you remember you have to…' Deborah began to rise from her chair.

'Don't.' Demetra stopped her. 'I know the way,' she quickly added and left.

The polished wooden door with familiar brass plate, she recognised at once. Stopping momentarily to take a deep breath, Demetra knocked at the door. No one answered to her. She stood near the closed door, wondering what to do next when she heard some commotion behind her. She turned quickly, spotting, at the end of the long corridor, a group of men moving in her direction. Mel Sharon was between them. As they neared, he smiled at her.

'Mrs Vanderson.' He held his hand to her. 'Welcome to our, let say, family.' Then he let her hand go.

'May I introduce to you some of your colleagues?' He said to her and turned to the rest of the group. 'Mrs Vanderson is our new

software specialist. She's an Electronics Engineer, PhD. She'll be helping us with the new equipment. She's employed by company on a permanent basis.'

Congratulations began to fall on her from all sides, the identical wide smiles covered their faces and stretching hands came to shake hers and were so blatant, making Demetra to wonder if they were sincere.

'Let's not lose our precious time on introductions. Due to course, you'll know each other. Let me show Mrs Vanderson to her office. Gentlemen.' Mel Sharon nodded to the others and, taking Demetra by the elbow, propelled her to the left.

'It's on the fourth floor.' He added. Demetra was silent. They went to the lift.

'This is your office. We've decided you'll be more comfortable staying by yourself. You can concentrate better.' He said opening the door wide.

Demetra stepped in and got transfixed. The room was identical to her office in Karsland. She lifted her eyes and the familiar CCTV was hanging on the left upper corner. She knew there had to be two more, but she didn't dare to look for those. She was back in the past; and continued to wonder why and who was doing that to her. A strange thought came to her mind, someone wanted to drive her mad. She didn't believe in coincidences anymore. Marcus was right.

'Do you like it, don't you? I thought you'd be more comfortable in an office which is familiar to you. Am I right? Well, it's yours. Be free to do what you want.'

'Thank you. You gave me a real surprise. I like it very much. Oh no, I love it.' Demetra smiled wondering what she'll do when he'll leave her alone.

'As you can see, your bench is empty. Today just take your time to get used to your surroundings. From tomorrow you can start. All new equipment will be in the main operator room and you'll be working with others there. It's a big project. Your closest associate

will be Roy Smith.' Mel Sharon stopped looking at the door. There on the threshold stood a very short bold man with the warmest smile. He radiated something good, secure and unpretentious.

'Oh, here you are. Come in, Roy. Let me introduce you to our new colleague.' Mel Sharon was all smiles.

'Welcome to our troupe.' Roy joked, reaching Demetra and taking her stretched hand. He gently held it for a split second and let it go. They exchanged greetings.

'You'll be working together on that new project. Roy will help you to get acquainted with our company. He'll take care of you today. I'll leave you both now. Good luck!' Mel Sharon nodded and left.

For a moment, both of them just looked at each other. Then Roy broke that awkward silence.

'How about a cup of tea?' He laughed hearty. 'I meant a cup of coffee. No one drinks anymore this liquor of Gods, as it was called in the past. We like to remember our tea parties but we only drink coffee nowadays. As soon as we lost our Empire in the middle of the twentieth century and immigrants began to move to the British Islands, they brought with them new customs and traditions. We're an adaptable folk. There were those people coming from the Caribbean who brought back the habit of drinking coffee. We tried the drink and, as you know, we became coffee drinkers just as them. And you?' Roy winked at her.

'I like coffee too. In Karsland only a few people were allowed to consume it. It's regarded unhealthy for the masses. All Barbò and some Stakhanò could never be permitted to test it. I had the privilege to have it and drank as much as I wanted.' Demetra said before she realised she talked too much. She forgot she was obliged to sign the paper of rules and regulations of her behaviour abroad. And she just blurted out the things which must be kept secret. She saw an amused expression on Roy's face.

'What I said just now, I don't want it is known to others.' Demetra stammered.

'Life there is so different from here; I don't want to be laughed at.' She added looking into his eyes.

'You couldn't find a less talkative person than me.' He replied seriously. Then he changed the subject.

'Did they provide you with a refrigerator too?' He went to the bench. 'Oh, yes, it's here.' Demetra saw him bending and reaching for something. Then she saw the door opened and there was a small refrigerator identical to the one in her flat.'

'They seemed to care for you. It's for drinks. Tap water is not potable.' Roy pointed to the small sink on the right from the door. Demetra had not notice it before.

'You've got all comforts, haven't you? You must be very special, being provided with such a luxurious office.' He sounded wistful.

'I used to have the same office back home.'

'Really?' Roy looked at her again.

'I can see you can make your own coffee, or tea, here but let's go to get some out there and meet the others.' Demetra agreed. They went to the door. Stepping out, Roy firmly closed the door behind them.

'It's yours, to get in.' Roy said giving her an electronic pass. 'Don't lose it. Mel told me to get it for you. When you go home, you must leave it downstairs. I'll show you where.' She noticed the small metal box on the right side of the door. It had to be for the card.

'It's out-dated.' Demetra pointed to the box.

'It has never been changed. It's convenient for management. Easy and cheap. All you have to do is changing the code and you can never enter it again.'

'I was under the impression that the thumb identification was better and easier.'

'Oh no, the thumb must be reprogrammed with each new person. With the card pass anyone inside the company can use it.' Demetra didn't reply, she just took a deep breath and thought about being tired of all that security business.

They went along the corridor walking on the wooden floor which was covered by a red carpet, she guessed, hearing the sound of creaking panels, wondering why they were never replaced.

They almost reached the end and stopped at the open door. Coming from inside, there were sounds of merrymaking. They stepped in. It was a kind of cafeteria. On one side was the counter, behind which a woman, dressed in a white uniform with white scarf on her head and rubber gloves, was serving refreshments. The rest of the big room was filled in with small round tables and chairs. There were quite a number of people in. Smoke filled the air. Demetra noticed the sign 'No smoking' was missing on the walls. There were all men, laughing loud at some joke, she thought. One of them turned his head.

'Come here, Roy. Isn't it Demetra, the famous Demetra, the Goddess of fertility?' A loud roaring filled the room.

'Don't pay attention to them. It's a usual scene here.' Roy whispered to her. They neared to the table occupied by the group. One of the men jumped from his seat and offered it to Demetra. She politely refused it. Roy went to the bar.

'We know all about you. I'm John. He's Will. He's Al,' the fat man introduced the others. Demetra remained silent. She didn't know how to behave in that kind of company. She was used to different manners and all those laughing men made her feel uncomfortable. Something in their manner made her feel they were laughing at her, although she knew it was an absurd thought. During the time she had spent in London she had already noticed that the Englishmen and women laugh loud and abundantly as if with that laugh they wanted to defy everyone and everything.

'Demetra.' It was Roy, who stood near one of the table on the other side of the room. She went to him. He placed a cup in front of her.

'Coffee is not so bad here. As for those,' he inclined his head in the direction of the men: 'don't pay any attention to them. They're

spending all their lives in front of computers. They must know by memory the bond's price of most of the companies registered at exchange. Their brains are tuned on numbers only.'

'I understand it,' she replied without going into details.

'How do you like our coffee?' Roy asked politely in attempt to keep a conversation.

'Delicious.' She smiled, wondering at the same time if she could trust him or if it was her false sense of security.

'Ah, there. See you later.' The fat man shouted to them.

In a few minutes, the cafeteria was empty and very quiet. Roy finished his coffee and sat politely looking at her. Demetra understood that it was time to leave.

'Today I am going to try a new program for one of our customers. It's quite large and complicated. My assistant is waiting for me.' Roy apologised, glancing at his watch.

'Sorry, I didn't know you were in a hurry. You should have told me about it before.' She quickly finished her coffee and stood up from the table. Roy brought her back to her office.

'I'll leave you to yourself. Get use to…' He stopped and opened his arms in gesture to take in all her office. 'I'll be back as soon as I can. Anyway, we'll be having lunch together. See you then.' He disappeared behind the door.

Demetra stood in the middle of the room for a while, just glancing from one side to the other. The complete silence was interrupted only by the ticking of the wall clock. No street sounds could reach there either. She swept in one glance her new office again. It was identical to hers in Karsland except for the big window, high on the wall, close to the ceiling. She didn't like it, especially when she sat at her desk, which was placed to face the door and that way the window was practically on top of her, giving her the impression that someone was about to enter through it and jump on her.

'What a crazy thought! I'm on the fourth floor.' She immediately stopped herself. 'I'm here to work, to be useful and to get some

money, which we need so much.' With those thoughts, Demetra went to her desk. The armchair was comfortable. Resting her elbows on its arms, she leaned on its back and slowly examined at her surroundings: the tall file cabinets, the testing bench, sink next to it, on her desk there was new leather writing set and a new PC.

'How? How is it possible to get an office identical to the one I had back home? There are no coincidences. Somebody knew about me and my life to be able to recreate such identical surroundings. Why? What is the purpose of such action?' The strings of fast thoughts were running in her head but her face was expressionless. The years spent surrounded by CCTV cameras trained her to hide her emotions. She was glad about that. It looked like it was useful in that free democratic country. 'And maybe more than in Karsland.' She smiled to herself.

The longest working days are the first and the last; Demetra repeated many times on that morning, which she thought would never come to an end. She had nothing to do, no one to speak to and not being sure if she should call Marcus from her office, she didn't. She was afraid he could have said or asked her something which could be better not to speak about. She was sure everything and everyone was being watched here. Not for nothing, she had three CCTV cameras in her office. She was sure each office had the same setting.

* * *

'Are you ready for lunch?' Roy was back at last. 'I couldn't come before. It took me longer than I expected. That program which I'm developing is moving slower than I thought. Let's go.' They left.

As they walked along the corridor, Demetra noticed the open doors of the other offices. She caught a glimpse of their interiors which were different from hers. There were no testing areas, no sinks and most of all; she spotted no CCTV on top corners. She found it quite strange.

'I usually bring my lunch with me. Just some sandwiches. I don't bother to go out. Today, I'll show you a few places that have quite palatable meals. So in the future you could have a choice.' Roy said, pressing the lift button.

'Thanks,' Demetra replied.

The street met them with the usual loud sounds and a strong wind blowing into their faces.

'We're done with the summer. Autumn is coming.' Roy switched to the beloved subject of English, weather. Demetra didn't comment.

They walked to the end of their block, turned to the right and reached the pub 'All King's Men', as stated on the sign. They went in.

It was a huge dark hall with very high ceiling made with traversed thick dark beams. The rectangular wooden, rustic-type, heavy tables with matching chairs, took all of the space. It was lighted by chandeliers with green shades, hanging from the beams. The hall was empty, except for two men in the faraway corner who suspiciously looked at them. The place gave her shivers.

'Do you think we could try some other place? It's quite cold in here.' She found a lame excuse.

'Of course.' Roy quickly agreed and pulled the heavy door. They crossed the road and walked two blocks until they reached "Bridges", a self-service restaurant. As they reached it, the double-glass doors slid to let them in. They stepped into a bright, colourful hall. A loud cheerful music covered the noisy sounds of the street and customers talks.

'I guess it's more of your liking,' Roy smiled.

'You've guessed it right.' Demetra uttered, suddenly feeling carefree. The sun was coming through the glass roof, adding to its space and brightness.

'It's the only place with a sunroof. No one knows how they could afford to have it. There are rumours that the owner is related to one of the influential bankers and this was a small garden in the

past. The banker got a permission to build a reasonably priced eatery, due to the shortage of such places in the City. I don't know if this story is true but, as you can see, we're here in a one-story building with a sunroof.' Roy laughed.

They moved to the self-service line. Demetra decided she would often have her lunch here. But she changed her mind after trying her meal. It was horrible, she thought. The meat was over fried. Jacked Potato was undercooked. And black coffee tasted more like a surrogate than a pure Brazilian, as was listed in the menu. Maybe she could have even overcome the awful meal, but the scene on her right made her decide never to eat there again.

Next to their table there were two middle-aged ladies dressed up with that elegance typical of the upper middle class: grey pants, pink cotton blouse and a string of cultivated pearls on their necks, professionally cut grey hair. Just when Demetra thought that even in London she could meet some presentable people, one of the ladies looked at the plate in front of her, smiled to her companion sitting across her, and then she slightly bent her head and with two fingers of her right hand she quickly removed her upper dentures and, without rush, she put it in a ready-opened case. She took the fork and began to consume her meal as nothing unusual just happened. Demetra was horrified by that lady, who treated such an inappropriate behaviour as a common matter.

'How is everything?' It was Roy. She glanced at his plate; it was half-finished. She guessed he didn't care for his meal either. She hoped he didn't notice the lady's conduct.

"I guess I'll bring my sandwich tomorrow.' Demetra replied. Roy's roaring filled the space, but no one paid any attention to it. It was common to hear that loud, unpredictable sound, so familiar to Londoners.

'Our Barbò could be shocked at such behaviour.' The thought passed through her mind before she followed Roy's example.

'I'm turning no better than they are.' She thought, but couldn't and didn't want to stop laughing. 'Maybe Marcus is right; I'm be-

ginning to enjoy the bad manners of the old Western Europe.' At the thought of her husband, she sobered.

'Oh, my God! I forgot to call my husband.' She exclaimed, quickly getting her phone from her bag and dialling the number.

'You took your time. I was worried about you. What's happened? Why did it take you so long to call me?' Marcus plagued her with numerous questions.

'I'm alright.'

'Well, how could I have known? You should have called me earlier.' He sounded hurt.

'I'll explain everything to you at home. I'm not alone here. It is lunchtime,' Demetra apologised.

'I understand. Take care. I'm waiting for you.' His voice changed to his usual one.

'See you soon,' Demetra replied and closed the phone.

'We can go now,' she offered to Roy who looked at something pretending to ignore her call. He nodded, and they leisurely walked back to their office.

'We're late.' Demetra glanced at the street clock.

'It's alright for a first day.'

'It's good we don't need to punch the card.'

'In our office this procedure was stopped a long time ago. I guess our social status is high enough to ignore such inconvenience as getting late to work. We're treated just slightly lower than our Ruling House.' Roy mockingly raised his eyebrows.

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Don't you know we're one of the most prestigious companies and we're here from 1796, just after the French Revolution?'

'What does it have to do with banking?'

'Everything. We were in charge of establishing accounts for anybody who fled France. At that time, we are talking about the eighteenth century, we managed to retrieve from there hundreds thousands of pounds.'

'Hundreds thousands?'

'Or maybe even more. No one knows the exact sum that it was the time when Rickchild joined us.' Roy proudly added. Then suddenly he asked her: 'Who are you related to? You sound as a foreigner. Are your ancestors from Germany?'

'Why? Do I look like one?'

'You do. But I'm not so sure about your accent.'

'I'm from Karsland. I've told you before.'

'I thought you were joking. Are you really from there? Here we regard it as a *paradise* on Earth. Why did you leave it?'

'My husband likes to see new places.'

'I've heard it's almost impossible for Karslanders to go abroad, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is. But there are a few of us who are the exception. We've got a special permission.'

'Oh, you must be lucky ones,' Roy said and fell silent. Demetra glanced at him, noticing his smile disappeared and got replaced by a grim expression. She wondered if he will still be sincere with her after her revelations. They reached their building at last.

'Hi, Goddess of Fertility,' she heard now the familiar voice.

'Hi, whatever is your name,' she replied to the fat man.

'I'm John.' His matter-of-fact normal voice took her by surprise.

'I'm Demetra.' Her business-like voice was cold. She instinctively felt that that ugly man was a trouble maker and she could not expect anything good from him. She could sense his dislike for her and she could not figure out what she did wrong to raise such animosity.

'Ignore him. He likes to joke, especially with female colleagues. He's really a lonely man who buried his parents, his wife ran away with another man who earned more than him. And above all, he'd got obese and, as you know well, with it he's got depression and desperation, not being able to get rid of all that extra weight. Obesity is very difficult to treat,' Roy took John's side.

'I can understand it. But I don't see why he has to be so nasty with me. He saw me for the first time in his life; he doesn't know me at all,' Demetra revolted.

'He's the same to everybody,' Roy concluded.

She was back to her office. It was still alien to her. Again, she took her place at the desk and sat for a while wondering why Mel Sharon didn't come back, if not with some work for her but at least to see how she was doing. She wished she could do anything but to sit in that complete silence and to listen to the ticking off the clock, which began to get on her nerves. She glanced at it. It was still a long way until the end of her first working day.

Chapter 33

With a smile Demetra remembered her first working day. In less than a week she already felt at home there; quickly adapted to the weary ways of her colleagues and company itself.

It was one of the oldest financial institutions in the UK and was a backbone of support to the Queen Victoria. The founder of the company, Henry Goldberg, was a brilliant banker. Having numerous connections, he managed to create a real financial empire, which survived through centuries despite of countless wars and catastrophes. At present, it was just a small financial firm, but it was still in good standing and prestigious as it was in the past.

The first impression of being employed with an old-fashioned British financial establishment had quickly disappeared, as Demetra began to work on her assignment.

Nothing old-fashioned or out-dated was in her work. To create 24-level F-sheets with MR-language was one of the most complicated things she had ever done in the past. The final software would be of multiple-use type. Demetra wondered about what could be the use of such sophisticated software and latest technology in such a small firm that didn't seem to have any connection with global financial institutions. That software could have been perfect for stock exchange volume of operations but for "Goldberg and Co."? She began to have some doubts about the integrity of the firm. She would have not dreamed to connect that proper company with any questionable business, but for the day when she met face to face with one familiar face.

It was her third week in the office. The morning started with coffee drinking in the all-in-one cafeteria. She took it with Roy, who became her friend and closed colleague. They were working together on new software for a company's system. As usual,

"fat John" called her "Fertility Goddess" and as usual she ignored him. Then she asked Roy if she could see his office.

'It was remiss of me. I should have done it a long time ago. But somehow I thought it was more convenient for you if I came to your office,' Roy apologised. 'Let's go.'

They went together to the fifth floor. Roy brought her to the hall which was full of various equipments. It was really one of the test rooms. One part of the hall was separated by glass panels and divided into several cubicles, each with its own entrance. They went directly to the one nearest to the main door.

'Here we are. My office cannot be compared to yours, but I'm managing somehow.' Roy looked embarrassed.

'I like it here. You're not alone. You have the chance to be with others. To discuss the project and be free. I don't have such luck.' Demetra tried to comfort the little man.

'You're so nice to me.' Roy seemed to be at a loss for words.

'Of course I am. We're colleagues and we are working on the same project.'

'Do you want to see an application of the software created by you?

'Of course, I do. Is it suitable for your application? I mean, for our firm's needs. I wondered if it could be useful for us.'

'For sure it is, otherwise they would have never took you for such work. Come here. I'll show you my work. Sit near me.' She obeyed immediately, afraid he could change his mind.

'Here we are.' He placed a chair for her. Then he took his place and Demetra followed his example. His desk was identical to hers: big, oak and massive, despite of the micro size of his office. On top of it there were three big-sized flat screens and in front of the middle one were a keyboard and a mouse. She glanced at the monitors. There were columns of numbers and letters moving rapidly. Her eyes were untrained for such tabloids, and she found it difficult to concentrate on a single line or column.

'I must admit I'm fully ignorant of these tables. My job is to

create software only. I've never seen this type of its application.' She reluctantly admitted.

'I know. This is why I thought it could be excellent for you to see in which way your software can be used. First of all, you must know that all information here is coded. It's done to preserve the privacy of the client and his assets. The first column is an entrance number; the second is a client's identification number; the third coded description of asset, the fourth the date of entering; and the last the date of shipping.'

'Shipping?'

'It's just a code word for a selling,' Roy quickly corrected himself. Demetra pondered about his reaction, but she hid her curiosity behind her friendly smile.

'Well, I caught your meaning. You want to tell me that my software doesn't work so well, am I right?' Demetra changed the subject at once.

'No, I didn't mean that. Although, I must admit that in some cases new software don't work and must be modified to our needs. Look at this, for example. I'll show you one of our old sheets which we've deleted as out-dated material,' Roy said and with the help of the mouse he closed the file and after quite a long search, at last clicked on something and opened the other file.

At first moment to Demetra it looked identical to the first one. But soon she saw it was not.

'Can you see a difference between these two files? This one can be shown on one screen only. There is no way to have more than twelve-figure identification or code numbers. It became a handicap for us. For example, this page.' He offered. Demetra looked on screen and something in those columns was familiar to her. She thought she had seen it somewhere.

'Nothing stays in the same place. The world moves and we move with it. I'm glad you've found new software useful for you.' Demetra slowly said. She smiled thinking about CCTV and trying to remember where she could have seen those columns.

'With the new software we're using twenty-four figure identification and code numbers. It's enough for us, although I would prefer to have up to forty-eight. Mel thought we're not going to use it enough to return fast of our invested money. I still think it could be better to get new software with forty-eight figure application, don't you?' Roy asked her. Demetra nodded, still looking at the screen.

'I hope you don't mind?' Roy said unexpectedly and switched to new software again.

'No, I don't.' Demetra slowly replied still thinking about that file. She was sure she saw it somewhere. But where?

When she was ready to leave the cubicle, the main door opened wide and Mel Sharon and another man stepped in.

'Roy, I need to see one of your famous files. We want it urgently.' The authoritative voice ran out loud enough to be heard through the huge hall. Then he noticed Demetra.

'I didn't know you're busy here with our new consultant.' He snapped, making Demetra to wish to be anywhere but there.

'I just passed by to greet Roy,' she uttered lumpy and looked away. But with the corner of her eye she caught the familiar face with a familiar tick.

'I guess I'd better be going,' she added and quickly left for the door. She knew she was running away but she didn't have the strength to stay there longer, especially when she recognised the man standing next to Mel. He was the same one who arrived with them on the military plane and whom she saw at Harrods, escaping from her. She felt all the world around her was collapsing. She had to find out who he was and what his connection with the company was. Roy must have known him.

'I wonder who the man with our boss was this morning,' Demetra asked Roy as soon as she had a chance to catch him in the corridor.

'Oh, that one? He's Joseph Dreher. He's one of our carriers.'

'Carriers?'

'Many of our documents are private and confidential. Our company employs some people to carry them by hand to their final destination. Joseph Dreher is one of them.' Roy pointed out.

'Of course. It's my first experience working with a financial institution. There are its rules, regulations and methods.' Demetra laughed, trying to make it look as a joke.

'Don't worry. Soon you'll be one of us.'

'I have no doubts about it.'

Then she changed the subject. 'I'm behind in my schedule. I should have reached five hundredth page already but I'm half way to it.'

'It's not important.'

'What do you mean? I'm concern to be made redundant.'

'You?' Roy loudly laughed.

'What's funny about it?' Demetra was annoyed.

'No one has ever been made redundant in this company, unless our bosses wished to make enemies in high places.'

'Well?' Demetra raised her eyebrows.

'Nothing. See you later.' Roy cut her short and sped up leaving her alone and wondering about what she did to make him runaway.

* * *

The same question she asked Marcus. At hearing it, he began to laugh annoying Demetra again as it happened with Roy.

'Still, didn't you understand or are you pretending not to?' Marcus asked, noticing her serious face.

'How could I, if all of you are speaking half-way and with halfwords?' Demetra revolted.

'Of course, you didn't. It's really a very simple matter as I can see it now.' Marcus said nearing to her. He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. With his right hand he lifted her chin and softly said: 'You should begin to grow up, my darling. I cannot imagine you there between those wolves.' He lightly kissed her on her lips. She felt tickling in her body but

instead of the familiar warm feeling, a hot anger swept her. She freed herself from his arms.

'I don't like to be treated as a child. I'm a grown up and not only a grown up but getting old, by British Standards. Don't treat me like a child.' She lifted her head haughtily.

'I won't. Well, you should know if someone says "no one has ever been made redundant in our company", it means that everyone is there under recommendation.' It became all clear to her.

'Who did recommend me?' Demetra lifted her eyes to meet his.

'Let's figure it out.'

'We don't have close friends here yet, unless…,' she opened her eyes wide and whispered: 'they contacted someone in Karsland. I guess it had to be Robert Young. He has his bunch of moles. I know it from my own experience.'

'Don't waste your time on useless task of wondering about something which has no importance to us. Don't you have some more interesting things to say? You've spent all day between variegated people and for sure, you've heard something unusual.' Marcus said, trying to change subject. And she did.

'Oh, you're right. I almost forgot about one encounter which astonished me at first and made me wonder on what to do next.' Demetra slowly uttered.

'Well, tell me at once. I'm curious to hear.'

She pressed her lips together as afraid to talk. Then she gently pulled him on his sleeve. He looked into her face and she began in the sign language.

'Do you remember that man with a tick on his left cheek? I saw him in Harrods.' He signed he did. She continued. 'I saw him today. He works in my company. His name is Joseph Dreher. He is a carrier for special deliveries.'

'Is he? It gets more and more interesting,' Marcus lifted his eyebrows.

'What do you mean? I don't see anything amusing in seeing him with my boss,' she said.

'I didn't mean that. When I said 'interesting' I meant that it's clear now why and who gave you the job. I found it quite unusual to be offered a job in the City, to a complete stranger and foreigner, alas newly-made British subject.'

'I don't agree with you on that. I'm a specialist and I perform my work as required. There is nothing wrong with offering me a position which I am qualified for.'

'This is where you are wrong. I didn't question your ability to perform the work. I'm questioning who and why provided you with this opportunity.'

'Well?'

'It's no longer a mystery for me. I want to meet this Joseph Dreher and ask him several questions. And I'll do it as soon as possible.'

'How can you?'

'You'll show him to me.' He firmly requested.

'How can I? I don't know when he'll be in the office again. I don't know where his desk is. I don't know anything about him at all. And I am not going to ask anyone about him,' she refused firmly.

'How about your Roy? He seems a good chap who admires you, as I figured out from your description of him. Ask him directly and let's see what he'll say,' Marcus insisted.

'I don't want to be involved in anything unpleasant. I don't even know how to start the conversation about that man.'

'I'll teach you. I'll tell you what to say to him. But one thing must be for sure, the two of you must be alone, no one must hear your questions. Is that clear?'

'I don't think it's possible. In my office I have three CCTV and microphones too. Unless I'll invite him for lunch outside and there I could speak with him,' Demetra offered the solution.

'Choose the place with loud music that it's frequented by young people. In such places no one will pay attention to you.'

'And what should I ask?'

'I'll prepare your questions, but not before we will have something to bite. I'm famished. I've spent all day walking from one auction to the other and I may get a job at one of them.'

'Without recommendation?' She asked laughing.

'I think so. In some cases you don't need any.'

'Tell me all about it. I was unfair to you, nudging you with my problems,' she apologised.

'I'd no chance to tell you about my short trip to the centre of Mayfair. By chance I went into one of the auctions and they're glad to offer me a job. I'll start tomorrow,' he said and took her in his arms.

'And all this time you've been interrogating me about my day and you didn't mention such important news! How could you be so selfish? I'm telling you everything that's happened to me and you're hiding all your news. I don't want to speak to you today,' Demetra said, trying to get free from his strong embrace. He didn't let her go.

'Your things are far more important than mine. It makes no difference for us if I find a job or not. I know our friends from home will always send us some money. I'm sure there must be some kind of agreement between our countries. It's true we need to work to get some income. You love to be busy. I know you're afraid to be stuck at home. I can see you're not happy about cooking and etc. You must work. Well, you're working now,' he stopped feeling she was no longer fighting him.

'I want you to be busy too but…' she smiled.

'Did I catch the hint of jealousy? You don't need to worry about me. I'm old enough to know the difference between real and fake, real beauty and fake, real good heart and fake. Why do you think I came back to Karsland? I'll tell you a secret: I came back because I didn't meet my match. And I met it there. I know what I have and I don't want to lose it. My life is to take care of you. And I'll do it,' he stopped and kissed her again. This time she responded to his kisses with the same fierce.

* * *

It was a triumphant day for Marcus when he got an employment. It took more time than he expected but his job was well paid, without being recommended by someone.

Marcus knew he could never make any money with his painting. He could not do it in Karsland, imagine in London which is full of any kind of artists who could create anything by order.

It was well-known that London was one of the biggest centres of antiques and thousands of tourists were coming just to acquire some rare piece of art. Having a Degree in Fine Arts and a quite deep knowledge of antiques, Marcus decided to seek an employment as an art consultant with any of the numerous auction houses in London, visiting each day one of those.

With patience and never-losing hope, he'd been inquiring for a position of art consultant. He knew it was presumptuous of him to ask for such employment without any previous experience, but he brushed aside those doubtful thoughts. He was sure he was capable to do it and he had no doubts that someday somebody might need his knowledge. And he was right.

It was quite a cool morning, one of those that would be better to spend indoors. But Marcus was out as usual to try his luck. That day he decided to visit two of the several auctions located in New Bond Street. He took care to put on one of his best suits and a cashmere overcoat, knowing that Mayfair area was frequented by well-off people. Nothing changed there over the past centuries.

He stopped a cab and alighted near Bond Street tube station. Without rush, he glanced around to orient himself. He knew his way to Bond Street but he didn't want to give the impression of being familiar with Oxford Street, which over the years had become a centre of throng. It was not a matter of being a snob: he was not used to sellers on the streets with their loud shrinking voices; each trying to overpass the other in the attempt to get a prospective customer's attention. The ware offered by those poor creatures was useless junk, which no one needed: packs of tissues, umbrellas, cigarettes and so on. It was a hidden form of beg-

ging. There was always somebody who could give a few pennies to help the poor to get something to eat. Nothing changed over the centuries, except bringing all that misery from the so called "Third World" to Europe; and England was suffering the most from those changes, due to its ex-colonial empire status.

Marcus quickly walked three short blocks and turned into New Bond Street. Walking on Oxford Street he felt of being over-dressed and out of place, but in Bond Street he looked just like anyone else. It was a completely different world. He had difficulty to believe that around the corner there was a Third World atmosphere, while here there was the old Victorian Golden Age.

On clean, water-washed sidewalks there was nothing except for a small green waste bins placed on tall rods near the crossing lines. The elegant dressed ladies and gentlemen walked in both directions. Silence ruled there. Their voices were so low there was no way to catch a piece of conversation. Marcus had been here once before, but he had no time to study his surroundings. That day, it was different. He was ready to meet anyone at their own level.

He slowly proceeded ahead, periodically stopping at shop windows to admire their displays. He enjoyed gone-by atmosphere and astonished at those unknown citizens who reproduced it and managed to maintain it. He stopped at red traffic light at crossing Brook Street and lazily glanced to his right, just waiting until traffic light changed.

The huge sign 'Gordon's Auctioneers Ltd' caught his attention. It was an old fashioned wooden stand, attached to the façade of an old building that dwarfed between two hi-rises. On impulse he decided to visit it, not caring on missing the special event at the famous 'Sutton's'.

He crossed the road and with wide strides found himself in front of the two-story brick house with three marble steps worn out in the centre and a huge wooden double door, dark from age. Two old-fashioned brass handles and a doorknocker ring held by

a lion head were very impressing. It was so strange to see such antiques that the sign above seemed to confirm all those things. Marcus took the ring and knocked on the door. He was not sure what to expect, but to his immense surprise the door slowly opened revealing a long corridor and a uniformed doorman who welcomed him with the widest smile, which Marcus had yet to meet in London. Without delay Marcus stepped in, quickly glancing around.

'Are you open today?' He asked the first thing which came to his mind.

'Yes, sir. We're having a preview of the coming auction on 25th of next month.'

'Well?'

'It's a sale of Renaissance collection of -. Excuse me, sir.' He didn't finish his sentence, hearing the knocking again. Nodding to Marcus he went to let a new customer in.

Marcus walked along the corridor until he reached an open door. He stepped in. It was a medium-size room, on three walls of which run glassed display cabinets full of various items such as silver, porcelain, glass, small leather things, all of those looked antique and in satisfactory condition. The colours were brilliant. Everything bespoke of admirable preservation or excellent copies.

'May I help you?' He turned around to see a tall, heavy-built man with a wide open face. He friendly smiled to Marcus.

'As a matter of fact, you may,' Marcus smiled back to the man.

'Well?'

'Your unusual sign caught my eye and my curiosity rose so much that I've decided to come in.'

'You couldn't do better. Are you a tourist?' The man lifted his eyebrows.

'Oh, no. I'm a British citizen now.'

'Your accent betrays you. No British could speak such perfect English; hearing you speak, it's like going back in time. I guess,

maybe two hundred years. You're a foreigner, there are no doubts. Don't get offended, it's just pure curiosity. Where did you come from?'

'Well,' Marcus stopped for a second wondering if to tell the truth and then he slowly uttered: 'I am from Karsland.'

The fat man's face froze instantly. His eyes bulged; his mouth opened showing extreme choc. I guess I crossed Rubicon, Marcus thought, wondering at the man's reaction. 'I've read the Fine Arts. My specialisation is in the classical art,' he said, pretending to notice nothing.

'How interesting,' the man seemed to regain his composure.

'Back in my country, I was often called to give my opinion on some antique object. Do you think you could use my knowledge in your company?' Marcus looked directly at the man and held his breath. He prepared himself for refusal, although he noticed that the man seemed to be studying him. Slowly, he moved his head from up to down, as to summarise Marcus. Then he winked and quickly said: 'I guess I need someone like you. You look like you're from the right background and I'll give you a probation period of three months. We'll see if we'll be able to work together and to make money together. Your salary will depend on our sales. You'll get commission from each sale. Your main job will be to try to sell expensive items. Higher the price – the higher your commission. Do you agree?'

'I do,' Marcus nodded, to the biggest surprise of the man. He had nothing to lose, thinking at least he'd be out of the flat and doing something. And if he'd earn some money, it would have been even better.

'You can start tomorrow.' The man said, shaking hands with Marcus.

* * *

'What is he doing in that dirty hole? Armand Green wrinkled his nose.

'It's the best area of London.' The driver reminded him.

'I know, stupid. I don't speak about the street. Didn't you see him entering that old dreadful place? Some may like all that stuff: auction, antiques. As for me, those are just old useless things. They should be thrown out, but someone decided to make money by selling them. The more dirty they are, the more money they'll fetch. I wonder why they are not afraid to catch some disease from all that antique filth.' Armand Green sighed, leaning on the back of his seat while holding a glass of red Martini in his right hand.

'I couldn't know about such things. We're a simple folk. I cannot afford a new overcoat over the last ten years, not to speak about antiques.' The driver commented.

'Don't play poor with me. I know you're getting quite a good salary working with us.' Armand Green reprimanded him. 'I guess he'll be in there for at least half-hour.' Armand remarked, slowly sipping his wine.

'We cannot stay here. There is a sign "No Stopping",' the driver stated, looking around for the sign.

'I know. Don't worry. No one will dare to disturb us. This area is under our protection.'

'Maybe it is, but I don't like to be stopped by Bobbies. I hate to show my driver's license to them,' the driver fretted.

'I told you not to worry. I will take care of everything.' Armand Green insisted, glancing through the window. 'There is nothing to worry about. Don't you see there is no traffic, no passer-by, no-bobbies?'

'They can come at any moment.'

'Shut up, stupid. What's wrong with you today?'

'Nothing. I just don't like to be in this area. It is too high for me.'

'But you like to have a good beef every day? Don't you? No one likes to be here. Look, he's out already. He has been fast. And smiling, too. I wonder what he did there. Start the engine. We must not lose him.'

Chapter 34

It was a dismal morning. Thick, dark clouds were covering the sky; there was no chance for the sun to break through their impenetrable gray layers. The gloom spread through the city, turning Demetra's mood to melancholic.

All her body felt heavy and seemed reluctant to move. But she forced herself to ignore its signals. Seeing her sad face, Marcus offered her to spend the day at home. Just to rest a while.

'There is no way I'll miss a working day because of bad weather. I'll go as usual,' she stated.

As she entered her office, she was sorry for not listening to Marcus. She sat at her desk looking at the blank wall and feeling like doing nothing. The ringing phone woke her up from the perplexed apathy. It was an internal line. 'What does he want from me?' Demetra thought about her boss, who took it as a rule to call her every morning and ask about her progress on the assignment. She hated his voice and his questions which were full of double meanings. She pretended not to understand their underlining, mostly sexual, context. She picked up the receiver and quite rudely said: 'Well?' To her big surprise it was Joseph Dreher.

'You know who I am, Mrs Vanderson?'

'Yes, I do.'

'I would like to speak with you.'

'Why?'

'I want to tell you something that might be of interest to you.'

'You can tell me now whatever you have to say.'

'No, I want to tell you in private.'

'Private? I don't know if I should meet you in private.'

'Sorry, I didn't express myself clearly. When I said in private,

I meant just outside of our building. I won't take much of your time, just a few minutes.'

'Well, I'm not sure if it's necessary.'

'It is. I'll be waiting for you at the entrance of the station at five.'

'I'm not promising I'll be there. Let me think.' She replied.

'I guess it is in your interest to hear what I have to say.' He firmly stated and hung up at once.

Surprised by his tone and insistence, Demetra contemplated on his words. Why did he refuse to come to her office? Unless he has some news from Karsland and does not want someone to hear about it. She missed her homeland so much that any news from there would have been the best gift to her.

Usually she would walk to the tube station with Roy, but that day she called him about having to rush out at the end of the day.

'I am also very busy today,' Roy said. 'Our boss brought me some urgent work which I must complete urgently. If I have to stay late, then have a nice evening. I'll see you in the morning.'

She left the office at five sharp. She knew it could take more than two minutes to cross the road and walk until she will reach the station. As soon as she turned around the corner of her building and was ready to cross the street, a taxi arrived from nowhere and blocked her way. Its back door opened and two men, their faces covered with ski masks, jumped from it. Grabbing Demetra from both sides by her elbows, they lifted her from her feet and pushed her into vehicle. It happened so quickly that she had no time to scream and no one seemed to notice anything. The taxi sped away at once.

As soon as they were in, the men taped her mouth and tight her wrists together with thin nylon cord. That precaution was not necessary. The shock of being kidnapped was so great for her that she lost consciousness almost immediately.

Seeing her laying limp and motionless, one of the men pulled his ski mask away and bent to see what's happened with her.

'What are you looking at? She'll be fine after a while. Put on your

cap, stupid. If she wakes up now, she'll see your face and we can close our business forever.' The second man warned his partner.

'She may be dead. Let me remove that tape from her mouth.'

'Leave it alone. We must keep her quiet,' the second man said.

'But if she'll choke, what will you do?'

'We must bring her to the destination and that's all. Our job is finished. You're paid for the transport only.'

'You're always against me,' the first man angrily replied and went to Demetra's briefcase. He opened it and began to rummage between her things.

'What are you up to? Leave it. It's not a part of our job.'

'Why not? I've always wanted to know what's in these bags.' The first man continued his search inside her case.

'I told you to leave it. What do you think they carry there? I'll tell you straight. There are sandwiches, a bottle of water and a make-up case. Nothing more.'

'You're right. Just as you said, but for the paper of a sandwich.'

'She ate it, stupid. Put everything in place. We're almost arrived.'

The man dropped everything back into her briefcase and glanced through the window. They were in the city suburbs. The vehicle moved along a street lined with trees on both sides. The clean-swept wide walkways bespoke of upper middle class area. The vehicle slowed down as they reached the long wall and then turned to the right at the sight of the gate which slowly began to open admitting them. Then there was a short run on asphalt driveway and direct entering to the lower ground floor of some house. Then it stopped.

'Arrived, *bella*. Come out. Move.' One of the kidnappers shook her roughly hoping she'll regain her senses. But she didn't.

'What's wrong there?' The second man was outside already.

'I don't know. She's lying as a trunk. Come here and look by yourself.'

'It's the last job I'm doing with you. Every time, something goes

wrong when I take you with me,' the second man said, re-entering the vehicle.

'Come on, ma'am. Wake up. That's enough. We must go.' He pulled her up but she was too heavy for him. He let her go and she fell on the seat.

'Look at her, she's still unconscious,' the first man noted her expression.

'I know. Do you know what to do next?' The other man said, removing the tape from her mouth and freeing her hands. Then he pinched her hard on the arm, hoping this gesture will help her to wake up.

'What's the delay about? Are you still inside there? Come on. Quickly.' They heard the irritated voice of the driver.

'She's not moving. We cannot get her out of the vehicle.'

'What a bull...!' The driver neared the back door. 'Let me see what's going on here.' He had just one glance at her and quickly commanded: 'Lift her up, idiot. Don't you see she's unconscious?'

'Yes. I do.'

'What did you do to her?' The driver angered. 'I told you to be careful and gentle with her.'

'Nothing. We were nice to her. Just shut her mouth with tape and tight her hands.'

'I hope she'll recover fast. Lift her and carry her gently. I'll show you the way.' The man went forward. The kidnappers clumsily picked up her.

'She's heavy. She looked like a small thing.'

'Don't speak too much. Watch your step. Lift her higher. Don't you see her hand is touching the floor? We're told to deliver her without stains. Lift her higher, idiot. I won't ever do another job with you,' the man complained again.

They entered the house, walked along a narrow corridor until they reached the door on the left. There in the doorframe stood a man waiting for them.

'Here. Put her on the sofa. Gentle.' He commanded, noting the awkwardness of the others.

'Are you sure you've treated her well? What's happened to her?' The man neared to the sofa and studied her face, noting her twisted hands as the men left them and her body strangely twisted, too. He straitened her torso and her arms. Lifting them, they were heavy and inert. A thought ran through his head. He remembered his mother-in-law who had a stroke and lay paralysed for months. He turned to face the kidnappers.

'We didn't touch her. I swear on my mother, I don't know what's happened to her.' The man pleaded. His forehead was sweating; his face was red and full of fear.

'You, miserable creatures, no longer able to deliver goods in a good condition. I should pay you nothing but I'll keep my word.' The man went to his pocket and retrieved a pack of money. He counted some and put the rest back in the pocket.

'It's yours. Go now. I'll speak with you later on.' He gave the money to the driver and turned back to study the woman lying unconsciously. He heard the men leaving the room and silence felt around him. He was in a great dilemma. He didn't know what to do next.

Armand Green was ordered to kidnap that woman and bring her to his house and wait for farther instructions. Armand did as he was told and the woman was in front of him. But who ever could predict she would get unconscious and for so long. He could not imagine any English woman reacting as such just from being kidnapped. What nonsense! But that woman did and now he didn't know what to do with her. First of all, he had to call his boss and let him decide on what to do next.

In less than an hour, Bert Blank in person entered the room. Generally, he never mixed with doubtful businesses, letting others to do dirty jobs for him. But this one was an exception. With wide strides, he reached the sofa and stood looking at the unconscious woman. He thought it would have been the best for

all of them to kill her at once, but he could not. The risk was too great. In case her husband would decide to fight them back. He could have made public those papers and the whole story would come out. Who could be sure whether his group would survive such publicity? After a long silence, Bert Blank cleared his throat and said in his low commanding voice: 'Bring some strong perfume.' Armand ran to get it. He quickly was back.

'What's this?' Bert asked reading the sticker. 'Opium?'

'I thought it was the strongest smell.' Armand apologised.

'Let's see,' Bert said, removing the tap from the bottle. He sniffed it. 'Wow, it's so…' He grimaced without finishing his sentence. Then he brought it under the nose of Demetra. It seemed not to work on her.

'It's not strong enough to wake her up, I guess. Let me try again.' Bert repeated the procedure. This time he noticed her eyelids slightly trembled and suddenly she opened her eyes wide and looked directly into Bert's black small ones. Her eyes fixed strangely.

'Who are you?' She murmured, disoriented.

Bert Blank jumped away from her hoping she didn't see his face properly. Armand took his place.

'You have nothing to be afraid of. You've got ill on the street and we brought you here to recover,' he quickly invented.

'I remember someone pushing me into a cab. Nothing more.' Demetra slowly murmured.

'We couldn't know it. We found you on the street. We must bring you to the hospital or your home." Armand played the Good Samaritan.

'I don't know. I don't think I can move yet.' Demetra said, closing her eyes. She felt tired to move or speak.

Armand stepped into the corridor where Bert was waiting for him.

'I don't need to warn you, no one must know she was here. Do you think these men who brought her here can keep their

mouths shut or do we need to take care of them?' Bert looked at Armand.

'They're old foxes. We don't need to worry about them. They'll never open their mouths. They're afraid of their own shade.'

'Alright. Do as you want. I'll leave now. You know what you must do. See you later.' Bert Blank walked out and Armand returned to the room thinking that it was the first time since he knew his boss that he looked so concerned and insecure.

Looking at the girl laying still inert on the sofa, he got annoyed: she was beautiful, of fine breeding that seldom can be seen in London at present, dressed in designer's clothes worth a fortune; his wife could envy that Salerni handbag.

'Will I find the courage to question her, as Bert ordered? If all that talk about her having some papers is just a clever pretence to kidnap her for ransom? She must be loaded with money if she can buy all that expensive stuff. What if her husband will decide to revenge her? Who knows these people from that crazy country? If he's had the courage to fight the State, he's a tough guy. Bert will wash his hands as usual and I'll be the one to pay for it.' Those worrisome questions stirred in his head.

* * *

Armand didn't mistake noticing the gloomy face of his boss. Bert Blank was not only concerned, but he was also worried. He knew he had to find a solution to one great dilemma and he was not sure how. As he drove his Bentley, his eyes were on the road but his thoughts were far away. He thought about his family business.

Bert's first cousin from paternal side was Waldermar Johann Weiss Blank, known as Wald Blank, head of the powerful Spider Group, the secret organization which was created in Spain in 1485 and moved to Swiss in 1658 with headquarters in Zurich. Spider Group was a genius creation of Ronaldo Blank, who was the first one to accumulate an immense wealth and wanted to preserve it. His idea was to hide his treasure for his grandchildren. It was

easy to say, but as he began to put his idea into work, he found out it was not so simple to preserve and hide the treasure. Too many people wanted to relieve him from his burden. He had three siblings and he decided to involve them in his project. After many discussions and arguments, they came to the conclusion to organise some kind of secret family group dedicated to the accumulation of wealth and hiding it from indiscreet eyes. It started as a family business at the time and it stayed as such. As time went by, from the three-member group it had grown to roughly three hundred members, all of whom were close relatives, and managed to spread around the World.

Over the last two hundred years, Spider Group became one of the most powerful and influential organizations, due to its capability to keep its secrets. The main present aim was the same as before: to grab the World's wealth such as paintings, sculptures, artefacts, etc. Not forgetting about diamonds, gold, any rare metals, gold and antique coins, anything which was a part of the World's inheritance. They managed quite well. For many centuries, Spider Group was invisible and successful in each of its adventures.

With time, Europe became a place of extreme poverty and widespread violent crime. Above all, the old Europe was dominated by non-white races. There were no places to hide anything anymore. There were too many criminals, and sophisticated ones. Not for nothing, they're trained by horror, crime and porn movies.

With tremendous difficulties, by bribing and fighting wars, Spider Group managed to create the state of Karsland, which they used as their warehouse. The newly-made State provided an excellent storage for anything. They had no limit for space, no expenses for keeping personal and no worries to be robbed or denounced to the law. They were the law into themselves.

Everything was perfect and efficient until that damned day when that girl entered into the OFF LIMITS zone. Who would have thought she would be so persistent, so stubborn and really silly? Who would have thought that that third grade artist of her

husband would be so switched on as to pay attention to the gossip about the existence of some secret group?

Bert Blank was in charge of the London's branch of Spider Group. Some time before, he had got a call from Wald Blank informing about the Vandersons coming to London. Wald said it was Bert's responsibility to get from Demetra those sheets which she took from the cave. Wald was sure she still had them with her. Any means were good to achieve that, but without bloodshed.

The easiest way would have been to kill her and everything would have been done. But he was told not to hurt her, since she was a privileged member of the State. *'They're getting all nuts. She should be prosecuted for her involvement in the revolt. But no, they let her go. She's costing us a good sum of money on top of everything. Well, something must be done. Let's see how things will go.'* The persistent sound of a horn brought Bert back to the reality. He pressed on the pedal to regain the speed. There was a lot of time to find a solution to that dilemma. That girl could not escape from London. And London was in his pocket.

* * *

During the following few hours, Armand acted as a nurse to Demetra. He placed himself on the chair across the sofa and patiently waited for her first movement.

Demetra was conscious but she continued to lie still, trying to put her thoughts together. She was no longer confused and had no fear of whatever those people had prepared for her. In her mind she was ready to confront any situation but her body betrayed her. She felt drained of all her physical strength. She was full of intense pain, which seemed to increase with each coming moment. Her arms and legs were heavy like they were filled with iron and gave her the impression of being paralyzed again. In panic, she stirred to assure herself of being wrong. Armand caught her feeble movement and was beside her at once.

'Are you alright now? Do you want something to drink?' He asked as soon as she opened her eyes.

'Tea, please. With lemon and sugar.' She said, trying to lift her body into a sitting position. Armand rushed to help to her but she pushed his arms from her.

'I don't need your help. Bring me some tea. Now,' she angrily commanded. Armand immediately went out.

As soon as he left the room, Demetra looked around studying her surroundings.

She was in a medium-sized room, bare of everything except for the sofa on which she sat, and a small rectangular table with a few chairs in the middle of the room and a tall chest of drawers near the wall. There were no windows and by the draft coming through the door left ajar, she assumed it was a basement, or as British called it, the lower ground floor. She's got the impression of being in prison. She was terrified at the thought of being kept there for a long time and no one to know her whereabouts.

'Your tea is ready.' Armand entered the room carrying a tea tray. His smiling face brought some hope to Demetra.

'You were fast. I guess it's your job to serve,' Demetra sarcastically said.

'You guessed right. I'm here to serve you. Sugar: two, three?' He quickly offered.

'Two.' She will be damned before she would thank him for a tea.

He prepared her cup and brought it to her; he seemed contented about something. She silently took it from him wondering what he was happy about.

'Do you like it?'

'Yes, I do,' she replied gloomy.

'Are you feeling better now? Do you think you'll be able to walk in a while?'

'Are you telling to me you'll bring me home? To whom belongs this place? Is it a private house or a building? I can see this room is in a lower ground floor, isn't it?'

'I'll bring you back to your home. But not now. I don't think you're ready for it.'

'Who are you? And why are you holding me here? What do you want from me? Money? How much?' Demetra demanded in earnest.

'I personally want nothing from you. It's not my house. Somebody brought you here and told me to take care of you and ask you for one thing only.' He sounded serious now.

'Which one?'

'Don't you know it yourself?'

'No, I don't.'

'I'll repeat,' Armand got irritated, 'I was told to ask you for one thing. My mission will be complete after I'll get the answer from you.'

'What do you want from me? I have nothing which can be of any interest to you or your associates. Let me go immediately.' Demetra was furious.

'You know well what they want,' he insisted. Seeing her holding the cup half-full of tea, he added: 'Drink your tea. We have a lot of time and you need all your strength to remember many things which we want to know,' he bluffed out being sure she had no ways to know it.

'You'll take me home. Now.' Demetra pressed her lips together and decided to stay silent until they let her free. Armand studied her stubborn expression and realised it was not so easy to break her. He had been told to be gentle and patient but he knew from his past experience as interrogator that this woman will die before she will tell what he wants to hear. There must be some other way to get those sheets from her.

'I'll be back.' He suddenly rose and stepped out.

The hot liquid gave her a new energy and with it a new strength to support her in the present circumstances. She placed the cup, which she still held in her hand, next to her on the sofa and tried to raise on her feet. Clenching her teeth and supporting her body with one arm on the sofa, with much difficulty she managed to stand up and keep her balance, despite of her head spinning.

'Don't tell me you're attempting to runaway?' The familiar voice

sounded sarcastic. It was Armand standing in the doorframe, his arms akimbo.

Demetra, with her face reddened from her extortion, plopped back into the sofa without replying: she was too angry at herself for being so weak.

'I thought about your circumstances.' To her big surprise, the man sounded cheerful now. 'I'm not going to play cat and mouse with you. I'll make it easy for you. The documents which you're in possession of from your home country - don't deny it, we have the proof you've brought it with you - must be given to us. We're giving you two days to place it under your doormat. Otherwise, we'll take care of you for real. Today was a kidnapping warning. Next time, it will be real and without return.' Armand concluded and, stepping into the corridor, he closed the door behind him. This time without leaving it ajar.

Demetra leaned back on pillows and looked at the ceiling. Strangely enough she felt no anxiety or worry, just dread for finding herself in such situation and anger at herself for taking that damned paper which brought her so much trouble.

In the end she was ready to give those papers away. Marcus told her once that in many centuries most of the spies have been coming from Great Britain and the cruelty of Cromwell. He was concerned about her life which may be in danger. She'll always be a witness and no one will leave a witness alive. Demetra shivered, remembering his words.

This time Armand didn't come back for so long that Demetra began to think he had left her there for the night. She glanced at her wristwatch. It was almost midnight.

'Is there someone? I need some help,' she shouted but no one answered her call. She was then desperate.

'I need to use a loo,' she shouted again into the complete stillness. She felt as being left in a tomb. There was no sound coming from anywhere. 'Help!' At last, she heard the sound of steps slowly getting louder and louder.

'I need to use a loo.' She shouted once more. This time the steps got nearer and at last the door opened wide and Armand reappeared. He went directly to the sofa.

'You took your time,' Demetra pointed out.

'Let me help you,' he said lifting her easily as she was just a toy.

'I can walk by myself.' Demetra tried to push him away.

'I know you can,' he curtly replied and holding her firmly he pulled her to the door. When they were out of the room, she saw in front of them, just across the corridor, the door wide-opened. The man brought her to it. It was the bathroom. When she stepped in, he closed the door. Demetra heard the key turning in the lock.

After a while, he was back knocking at the door. 'Are you finished?' She heard.

Glancing into the mirror, she was shocked at her appearance. Her hair was dishevelled, her make-up ruined, her face was too pale. She said to herself*: 'Courage, Demetra! You survived the tortures of Karsland. Nothing can be worst. They will not dare to kill you. As long as you live, there is always a hope to get free.'* Then she shouted loudly: 'Open the door.' Armand did it at once. They were back to the same room. But this time he picked up her coat.

'Put it on. We're leaving.' He helped her with it. Then he took her scarf.

'Cover your face. I don't want to blind you with some rag. Just cover your face. I'll lead to the car. We'll bring you back home but remember you have two days to place that document under your doormat in the corridor.' He repeated the request and tightened the scarf around her face. She didn't mind. The most important thing was they were bringing her back home.

They slowly moved along the corridor. Demetra thought it would never end. Then she was lifted in somebody's arms, she was sure it was a different man, he smelt of cheap tobacco and sweat. She thought she would suffocate from those strong odours, but

soon she was put down on the seat. She was inside some vehicle. She wished she could see where she was, but she didn't dare to move. She felt those men were the kind who didn't care for death or life. She resigned to be patient and hoped she'd be home soon.

'My bags. Don't forget my bags.' She reminded to her captors.

'Be quiet. You'll have your bags.' The harsh low voice replied, thrusting his elbow into her ribs painfully.

Standing on his driveway and watching the vehicle disappear around the corner, Armand sensed a huge relief. The guilt of being involved in kidnapping of such a beautiful girl and more of being her interrogator and prisoner, laid a heavy weight on his consciousness. He thanked himself for being quick enough to get the idea of giving her the respite of two days without any interrogation. It was an excellent thought and Bert Blank immediately agreed, as soon as Armand proposed it to him.

Armand was glad she was out of his house, since it was his house indeed, although he told her otherwise. It was not his problem if Bert would have not been able to get what he wanted from that girl. The most important thing for Armand was being free of that matter. Let someone deal with her but not him, he thought, entering the house.

Chapter 35

When Demetra didn't show home at her usual time, Marcus thought she stopped at the supermarket to get something for dinner. As time passed, she was over two hours late and Marcus began to worry about her, especially when he found out her mobile phone was off. He decided to wait no longer. At nine o'clock he stood up, put his coat on and hastened to the nearby police station. He dashed through a short block until he reached his destination, mounted the steep steps and pulled a heavy wooden door. He was at the entrance hall fully deserted. There was no one at the inquiry desk. He decided to wait there until someone would show up. It took a good ten minutes before he spotted a uniformed man at the end of the corridor.

'Hi, there. I need some help.' Marcus gesticulated to the man who spotted him. Without rush, the man walked to Marcus.

'Do you need something?' He looked inquisitively.

'Yes, I do. I was here for a good ten minutes but no one is around.'

'It's late. Well, what's your problem?'

'My wife didn't come home,' Marcus said.

'And what?' The man seemed surprised as much.

'What to do you mean: and what?' Marcus got angry. 'We're new to this city. My wife is employed in the City. She's never been late from her work. Today she didn't come home. Something happened to her. I want you to find her.'

'I understand your worries. Let me see what I can do for you. Come here with me.' He turned into one of the rooms. There was a desk and two chairs. The man sat at the desk.

'Please take a seat.' He pointed to the empty chair. Marcus did so, reluctantly.

'Well, you said your wife didn't come home?' He lifted his eyebrows.

'You must look for her immediately. You must find her as soon as possible,' Marcus stated.

'First of all, you have to wait twenty-four hours. If your wife will not come back, you may return here and fill in the forms about her disappearance. We need a recent photo, better without hat or glasses if she's using them. Better in her usual clothes, not in summer ones but autumn ones and…'

'And what else?' Marcus raised his voice, losing his patience. 'My wife is missing and you're telling me all this bull….'

'Wait a second. You're speaking to a policeman. It's offence to offend anyone who is in the public service, especially a police officer. I'm warning you to watch your language.'

'Oh, yes, I'm the one to blame. I need help, I come to the police and all that I hear is to wait and come tomorrow. Do you know my wife is a very ill woman? She's recovering after a terrible ordeal. I am trembling just thinking of what could have happened to her. She may be collapsed somewhere, lying unconscious.'

'I understand your concern but we have our rules and regulations. In your case, we can do nothing before the twenty-four hours pass. If your wife will not show up by that time, we'll be glad to help you. Good night.' There was nothing for Marcus to do. Roots of British bureaucracy were implanted centuries before and went so deep inside that there was no way to remove or even reduce them. For sure, Marcus was not the guy to do it anyway. He silently cursed the British system together with Karsland's and left the station. He was desperate, not knowing what to do next.

Approaching his building, he noticed a short well-dressed man under a big tree not far from the entrance. Marcus could have passed by him without paying any attention, if the short man didn't address to him: 'Mr Vanderson? I'm Roy. I work with your wife. Could I speak with you?'

'Oh, yes. I know about you. She often mentioned you to me.' Suddenly, the hope of finding her sparkled within him.

'I know what's happened to her.' Roy whispered, as afraid someone could hear him.

'Do you?' Cold sweat covered Marcus' back. He was afraid to hear bad news.

'I'll tell you everything but I don't want to be seen with you.'

"You're late for that. Our building is thoroughly supervised.' Marcus grinned bitterly. 'Never mind. Let's have some coffee in that specialised coffee shop and you can tell me everything.' Without waiting, he turned to cross the road.

To their luck, the shop was empty. The first turn of early customers was over and the late one didn't arrive yet. Each of them took a cup of coffee and a brownie, and carried their trays to the farther corner.

'Well?' Marcus raised his eyebrows; his face was calm and relaxed.

Looking at him, Roy had back thoughts of having such rush. The man in front of him seemed not to care about his wife whom he, Roy, worried too much about. Nevertheless, he glanced around them, noting CCTV in three corners and covering his mouth with his hand he began: 'Usually, we, your wife and I, walk to the tube together. Today I was told to do some extra job. She called me, telling she had to leave the office as soon as the day was off. I told her about being busy and wishing her a good evening, in case of staying late. Then I tried my best to finish that assignment fast and as soon as I did, I grabbed my things and ran to her office. But she was already gone. I rushed to the entrance, hoping to catch up with her. I was only a few minutes behind. As soon as I was outside I glimpsed her turning around the corner. I ran after her and the moment I turned around the corner, I saw her being pushed into a taxi by two men wearing ski masks.' Roy stopped to take a breath. After a few moments he whispered: 'I managed to remember the plate number.'

'Do you? Thanks. I guess I own you my wife's life,' Marcus solemnly uttered.

'I came to your building before but I couldn't trust to face your porter. A big black one. I decided to come again later on. I waited for you for a while. I needed to tell you this. What are you going to do now? I don't think it's a good idea to look for that taxi. It must be a fake plate. Whoever kidnapped her, for sure, did it before and that vehicle is used for these purposes.' Roy was urgent to help him. Marcus sat quietly thinking about Roy's story. He looked at Roy, smiled to him and said: 'She's my life. I'm going to find her. I don't know how, but I'll do. Don't worry, she'll be back to us and very soon.'

'I guess I'll be off. I'm not going to say anything about her at the office. You'll inform them yourself, if needed.' Roy quickly said.

'Better not mention about what you saw today to anyone. Not even to your family. Thanks again.' Marcus stretched his arm and felt a piece of paper that Roy covertly put into his hand. 'See you.' He said and left the coffee shop at once. He didn't turn his head to see the worrying and withdrawn face of the small man.

On his return, Marcus switched the TV on to listen to the latest news, in futile hope to hear something about Demetra. Kidnapping or just ordinary robbery, he wondered, which one happened to her?

After hours and hours spent in front of the TV with the remote control in his hand, listening to all various events, he gave up to hear about her. It was one o'clock when he decided to go to bed.

As soon as he put his head on the pillow, he fell asleep. He awoke from the persistent ringing of the phone. He ran to the sitting room and took the receiver.

'Hello,' he answered.

'Is it the Vandersons flat?'

'I'm Mr Vanderson.' Marcus felt the cold sweat covering his body. He knew there was news coming about Demetra.

'We've left your wife at Victoria Station. It's a little late, but

we think she can find her way home. She'll tell you why she has been late.' The low husky voice mumbled the message in a strong Cockney accent, typical of East London, as Marcus was able to figure out, and then hang up. He continued to hold the receiver forgetting to place it back. It took a while to him to notice the loud continuous beeps coming from the device.

Then he heard the familiar sound of his mobile phone coming from the bedroom. He ran to pick it up.

'It's me. I'm at Victoria Station. Remember the ticket office? Please come to pick me up. I'm very tired. Please be quick,' Demetra whispered between short heavy gasps.

'Are you alright?'

'No, but it makes no difference at the moment. I'm waiting for you. Please be quick,' she uttered and hung up.

He glanced at the clock; it was twenty to two in the morning. He had slept for just a half hour. Quickly dressing up, he wondered what happened to her and where she had been all that time. In less than five minutes he was running down the stairs to the lobby.

'Get me a cab,' he dropped to the porter.

'Yes, sir,' the black man replied, turning to the door. He went out. Marcus decided to wait for him inside as precaution against some mischief.

'Sir, your taxi is waiting for you,' the porter was back. His eyes were shining, behind his polite answer; Marcus sensed his curiosity.

'Thanks.' He was not one to share his troubles with the porter, especially with that one. He remembered well his attitude on their arrival there.

'To Victoria Station. Quickly,' he dropped to the driver and turned his head to the window. Outside was dark. Since the country was in default for years, most of the streets were without any street lights; even the main roads were poorly-illuminated. No one could be seen at that late hour and Marcus worried about Demetra, being alone in such an unsafe place as Victoria Station.

'Which entrance, sir?'

'Main.' The taxi stopped not so far from the taxi line.

'You wait for me here. I'll be back soon.'

'Look, I don't want surprises. I would like to be paid up front.' The driver complained.

'I said I'll be back. I need to return home, don't I?' Marcus said and turned to the entrance. In wide strides, he entered the famous railroad which over the centuries has become a haven for any crime and despicable matters. Glancing at CCTV placed at intervals he wondered if those devices were operating. He doubted it, noting the groups of suspiciously looking people standing not far from him. He saw her almost at once. Her pale face covered with stress and fear. She looked small and lost, standing near a closed glass door with the sign 'Southern Railroad'. He ran to her.

'Oh, Marcus,' was all that she managed to say before beginning to cry. She cried loud and all her body was shaking under a strong emotion. Marcus held her close and kept silent, patiently waiting until she will release her stress.

'It's alright, my love. Stop it. Let's go home. The cab is waiting for us. Let's go or he will run away and we'll be left here for the rest of the night.'

'I am, I am so…,' she broke into sobs again.

'You'll tell me everything at home. Let's move,' he insisted, putting his arm around her waist and slightly pushing her to the door. Reluctantly she began to move, at first slowly and then faster. They reached the cab at last. Ignoring the curious look of the driver, Marcus opened the passenger's door and went in, pulling her with him. They were seated at last.

'Back to Sloane Avenue,' Marcus commanded, wondering what the driver had thought about his trip.

'I'm so tired. I want to go home,' Demetra whispered to him.

'We're on our way.'

'No. I want to go back to Karsland,' she explained.

'We'll speak about it later, my dear,' Marcus quickly replied,

hoping the driver didn't hear her. After a few minutes, they reached the building.

'Can you get out by yourself? I have to pay.'

'Yes, I can.' He felt she reluctantly detached herself from him and slowly left the vehicle. She stood near it, waiting for him. As soon as Marcus had paid, he turned to her and holding her by the waist they mounted the steps.

The porter stood there, already holding the opened door. His black eyes studied them with intense curiosity which he didn't bother to hide. Marcus caught the ugly smirk on his face at the sight of Demetra.

'Good evening.' The man grinned at them. Ignoring him, they rushed to the lift and then to the flat. At last Marcus closed the door behind them and locked it on all locks, wondering why he did it. Demetra stepped into the bedroom and continued to stand in the middle of it as not knowing what to do next.

'Let me help you with your coat.' Quickly he removed it from her shoulders. Then seeing she continued to stand there, he began to undress her, deciding the bed was the only place for her at the moment.

'Thanks,' she murmured, stretching herself under the blanket and closing her eyes. She seemed withdrawn of all her energy.

'I'll get you something to drink. Some tea,' he offered.

'It would be so nice of you but I don't feel like moving anymore. I'm so sorry.' She added without opening her eyes. Marcus saw the tears beginning to run down her cheeks.

'What's happened to you today? Tell me. I must know,' he insisted deciding it was a high time for her to begin to talk. He knew it was too late into the night for any confessions but he wanted to know the truth. She continued her silent cry. It was more terrifying than those loud sobs earlier.

'Demetra, be a good girl. I was here worrying about you for hours. I went to the police to report about your disappearance. Tell me what's happened to you?'

'Reported to Police?' She opened her eyes. 'What did they say?'

'Nothing. I was told to return after twenty-four hours. Before then, they won't take a report on a missing person.' He sat on the edge of the bed and took her thin hand in both his: 'I almost got mad from the worry. Then I met with someone, I'll tell you the name later on, who told me about you being pushed into a cab.' At those words Demetra shuddered.

'It's true. I hoped it was just a tale.' He squeezed her fingers: 'I guess I'll better wait until you'll feel like talking about it.'

'Nothing bad happened to me. I just got a shock. I was afraid they wanted to rob me and kill me. But they wanted something else.' Demetra said, looking directly at him.

'You mean they wanted those sheets, didn't they?' He asked in the sign language.

'Yes, they did,' she replied, 'I'm too tired to speak now. I'll tell you everything tomorrow. Please let me be. Sorry for this. Do we have some lemonade? I feel like to have some.' She closed her eyes again.

'I'll get it at once.' He rose and went to the kitchen. He was happy she felt to do something even if it was just to drink. He knew then she'd be alright the next day. He had to be patient and wait until she'll be able to tell her story. Marcus sighed heavily, remembering his bachelor's life and his first glimpse at her, which changed his life.

* * *

Demetra stayed inside her flat for over a week, recovering from her dreadful experience. The first two days she worried and shivered at each phone ringing or neighbour's bell, thinking it was the kidnappers with their demands. But to her big surprise no one disturbed them.

The morning after her ordeal, she told Marcus everything that happened to her in detail, including the request made by the kidnappers. After hearing all her story, he comforted her assuring that she had nothing to be afraid of. He promised to be with

her every minute and everywhere. He called her office, informing them that she was ill and would not be in. He called his office too, telling them his wife's got ill and he needed to take her to the doctor. Then he called a medical doctor and asked him to visit her.

After examining her, doctor subscribed her some tranquillisers and rest. It was exactly what she needed. Marcus gave him an extra hundred pounds for the disturbance, as he put it to the man. With profuse thanks the doctor left the flat and Marcus was sure Demetra could stay at home as long as she wanted.

'Do you think they've left me in peace?' She asked him in the sign language.

'Let's hope they did.'

'You don't think they did, do you?' She insisted.

'Those people are the type who never gives up anything which they've decided to do. I don't want you to get worried about that matter, although I know you will. It's not just a matter of giving the papers to them. We must be sure that after getting what they want, they'll not get rid of us. We're here alone, strangers to everybody and everything. If something happens to us, no one will care. Karsland is faraway and even there, we have no one who could take our side.'

'I don't believe that. We have Liz Issel and your brother Alexis who could help us. Liz is Albert's daughter, the President of the State Committee. Who can be more important than them,' Demetra confronted him.

'Even if they are so, we have no means to inform them about our predicament.'

'Let's send them a telegram.'

'Are you joking? There is no such service in Karsland. You forgot there is no Internet either. We could do one thing only. We could try to call them on the phone, on a public phone, directly to the State Committee, to Albert Issel and ask about Liz. Who knows, he may even tell her and she may do something for us.'

'I don't think it's a good idea. How about Alexis at the hospital?'

'We'll try that, too.'

* * *

The cold, strong wind was blowing from the sea. The leafless trees bent their branches, twisting them in intricate patterns. The wind passing through them created a loud whistling sound that covered up all other sounds around. The pieces of paper, plastic bags, plastic containers and other trash, were dancing in the air and Marcus pulled his hat down to his eyebrows to protect his face from flying rubbish. It was a late morning but the street was deserted except for a few scantily-dressed young girls, who passed him speedily running from the biting cold.

It was a long walk to Old Brompton Road, but he didn't care for it. There was a phone shop for international calls and Marcus hoped he could manage to speak to Alexis. All the way to that shop his mind was occupied by a strange encounter.

After locking the door behind him, he turned in the direction of the lift. As soon as he reached the second door on his left, it opened and an old presentable lady stood in the doorframe.

'Mr Vanderson? I'm Lady Elisabeth Onslowe. How is your wife?' She smiled to him graciously. At first, Marcus was perplexed by her words, wondering who she was.

'She's better now,' he found his words at last. 'Do I know you? I don't remember meeting you before.'

'Oh, yes. Your wife knows me well. I didn't see her for a while. She seemed a fragile lady. Is she well?' She spoke politely in educated English which was called RP in old times, the language of the upper classes.

'She's in bed. She has been ill for over week but she's getting better. I hope she'll be back to normal soon.'

'I'm so glad to hear it. Send her my sincere wishes for her quick recovery.'

'I'll do. Thanks.'

'Have a good day.' Lady Onslowe nodded to him and stepped

into her flat, quickly closing her door. Marcus had no chance to say 'Good day' to her.

And then, walking toward the phone shop and thinking about that lady, he suddenly realised that she knew about Demetra's illness and spoke to him as being aware of their affairs.

'Nonsense. She's just an old gossipmonger who loves to mind everybody's business since she has no one of her own,' he said to himself, but remembering her alerted light-blue eyes watching him under her smile, he's got the impression she had been studying him. Why did she introduce herself to him? He knew that English etiquette didn't allow the ladies to introduce themselves to strangers. Assuming Lady Onslowe thought that Marcus, being a foreigner, was not familiar with English good manners. In that case, she spoke to him to find out what's happened to Demetra since she didn't see her so long. Doesn't it mean the old lady was watching over his wife? On my return I must ask Demetra about that lady, he concluded, sighting the sign "Global Communication Talk".

At his request, the clerk pointed him to the cabin number four. Marcus hardly managed to squeeze into the micro cubicle. As soon as he was in, the hot air began to blow from the opening in the ceiling, creating an unbearable heat inside the cabin. On impulse, he thought to call the clerk but then changed his mind. Instead, he unbuttoned his overcoat, removed his hat and retrieved his address book. Taking a deep inhale of air, he paused for a few moments before dialling his brother's number. He was lucky. Alexis was at home after the night shift.

'It's me, Marcus.'

'What a surprise! How are you there, old chap?'

'We're fine, but we need your help. Listen carefully. You must go to Liz and tell her Demetra is in danger. Someone kidnapped her. She's back home now. Let Liz to speak to her father,' Marcus blurted out in one breath. He got a feeling he had no time to explain everything.

'Are you sure of it? Kidnap? I can't believe it.' Alexis astonished.

'Did you understand what you must do?' Marcus insisted, trying to put his brother on the right track.

'Maybe she was mistaken about…' Alexis began again, but Marcus interrupted him at once. 'Listen, I don't have time to explain you everything. Go to Liz and tell her about Demetra's kidnapping. Is that clear?'

'Yes, it is. You never change. I'm so glad to hear your voice. I was worried about you. And you're so cool and calculated.' Alexis seemed hurt.

'No, I…' Marcus began to explain, but the long beep of disconnection line confirmed his fears. He glanced at the counter clock. His call was one minute and ten seconds. 'Big Brother improved his performance drastically. Their equipment must be of the latest design. Such speed is admirable. Faster than in Karsland. There, it takes one minute and twenty-five seconds,' he thought, taking his hat and leaving the cubicle. He went to pay.

'Twenty-three pounds and fifteen pence,' the clerk said, smiling to Marcus.

'Twenty-three? Are you sure? Check your rates. I've only spoken for one minute.' Marcus got angry.

'Calls to Karsland are the most expensive ones. We don't have a direct line. It's going through an outside server and we're paying for it dearly. I've switched on the heating unit for you to be more comfortable. You can charge it to your credit or debit card.'

'Can I? Including heating unit, too? How nice of you!' Marcus replied through clenched teeth. He went to his pocket and got his wallet. Getting twenty five pounds, he threw them on the counter and turned his head to look through the glass window, waiting for his change. Outside it was getting even gloomier, thick dark clouds covered the sky and the wind seemed to be getting stronger than before. Marcus spotted across the street, at a bus stop, a man sitting on the wooden bench who looked suspicious to him. Nothing was unusual about him; just an intuition told Marcus

that the man looked like a mole, in his leather coat and small leather flat cap. I must be getting paranoid. That man has nothing to do with us, he thought.

'Your change, sir.' He turned to the counter again, and sweeping coins into his hand with one move, he went out without even glancing at the clerk who looked at him curiously, since it happened seldom that someone would pay such a big sum in cash.

* * *

Meantime, Demetra was getting impatient for Marcus' return. She rose from the bed and went to the window. The street was deserted and she could hear only the sound of the wind. It looked like a storm was on its way, making her wonder about Marcus being outside in such weather. She went to the kitchen to prepare some coffee. When it was ready, she carried it to the sitting room. She sat on the sofa and ignoring the manners, she put her feet up on top of the table. Waiting for the coffee to cool off, she glanced around her and at that moment all her world went upside down.

With horror, she saw a huge black rat entering the room and ran through it directly to the kitchen and then disappearing under the dishwasher. It all took just a few seconds, but its image was imprinted in her head, growing bigger and bigger. She felt surrounded by those ugly, disgusting creatures, and the more she thought about it, the more she felt sick and ready to vomit. Inside her, all her muscles began to vibrate until her teeth began to grating against each other. All her body was shaken by then and she had no means to stop it. She screamed uncontrollably, forgetting about being heard by neighbours. It was terrifying. After a while she began to calm down, returning to her usual self, but the internal shaking continued for some time. Her hands were still shaking when she heard the sound of the key turning in the lock. It was Marcus, at last.

'Here I am,' he entered the room. 'What's the matter with you? Did somebody come here? Any calls?' He saw the terrified face of his wife.

'I…' With a quivering voice she tried to explain to him what she had experienced, worrying that he was going to dismiss her reaction as excessive and unnecessary. How on Earth could she find the right words to make him believe her?

'Sorry, it's stronger than me. I am revolting unconsciously against rats. It must be written in my DNA,' she bent her head, 'I have been waiting for you. I worried about you. Outside is so gloomy and windy.' She looked so fragile and small, fully lost in that world, which was so alien to her. Marcus cursed himself for taking her away from her home. Again and again he blamed himself for letting both of them down.

'Your coffee must be cold. You cannot drink it. Let me make you a fresh hot one.' He took the tray to the kitchen. Soon he was back. Demetra noticed two cups with steaming coffee in them. She smiled, feeling his care and love.

'Let us drink fast. I love my coffee hot.' He sat next to her and lifting his cup he drank the hot liquid in one gulp. Then he cuddled her.

'I hate rats. They remind me one of the most horrible times in the history of Russia and especially Sankt Petersburg. During WWII the German's blockade of that beautiful city continued for 900 days. The first winter was the most difficult one, with temperatures below minus 20s degrees and nothing to eat. Germans bombed the food storages at the beginning of the blockade, leaving the city to die from hunger. I do not need to tell you this story, you know it well. But the rats and mice were the only ones that had enough to eat there. Those animals moved in groups and used to attack weak people, who walked slowly on the snow dragging their feet. When the persons couldn't resist them and fell down, the animals jumped on them. This is why I cannot stand the sight of rats,' Demetra concluded. Marcus pulled her closer to him.

'I know it. I don't want you to think about it. Let us change the subject. Do you know Lady Onslowe?'

'Yes, that's the poor old lady who lives in the flat just two doors to the right across us. Why you ask?'

'How well do you know her?'

'I've met her a few times. Just "good morning" – "good afternoon", nothing more. She's so polite and kind. She speaks impeccable English. I didn't see any harm in greeting her.' Demetra said.

'She stopped me in the corridor, introducing herself and asked about you. I told her you have been not well, but now you're better. She sent you her wishes for a fast recovery.'

'Thanks. It's so nice to have someone who cares, isn't it?' Demetra boomed with happiness. Looking at her, Marcus felt guilty to destroy her good mood but he needed to say that.

'At first I thought that too, but then I remembered her eyes which watched me with such a strange expression and all of sudden I thought she inquired about you. You're not on such closed terms with her that a week without seeing you could have made her to worry. I began to think there might be something behind her friendly smile.'

'I don't know,' Demetra said, her face, which a minute before was radiating from happiness, was then withdrawn. She looked at him with wide-opened eyes.

'Do you think she had heard something about my...,' she whispered.

'I don't think so. Maybe she heard some gossip from porters. Those people always discuss all sorts of things. That night, I left the building alone and I came back with you. They were wondering what was happened to you.'

'I guess you're right. Old ladies are curious. She's no different from others,' Demetra concluded.

'If you feel like lying down again, do it. I'll cook our lunch,' Marcus said, trying to sound carefree. Marcus was sure that there was more to that old lady than eye could see. But Demetra didn't have to know about it yet.

Chapter 36

Marcus left for his office. He was reluctant to leave Demetra alone for an entire day but his boss, Alan Gordon, called him asking to come down. He needed his help arranging the preview of an important auction. Of course, Marcus had to be there, Demetra insisted. There was no need for him to stay all day with her. She felt fully recovered and ready to return to her office the day after. Marcus didn't argue. He didn't want to risk losing his job by ignoring Alan's call.

Reaching the building, he glanced at the familiar sign, winked at it and grabbing the familiar knocker, he tapped. The door was opened by the doorman.

'Mr Vanderson, good morning. Nice to see you back.'

'And I am glad to be back too. Everything is all right, I hope.' Marcus greeted him. Crossing the threshold, he stopped in wonder. If it was not for the doorman, Marcus would have thought he was in the wrong place.

In the entrance hall, and as far as he could see along a long corridor, there were piled open wooden crates, carton boxes of various sizes, rollers of carpets and some other unidentified bundles. Dozens of workers were busy unpacking all that stuff. Somewhere from the far he could hear the loud voice of his boss.

'Be careful,' Alan shouted at the young worker who carried a big carton box. 'Take care of this pack. It's not a bag of potatoes for you. You should never carry it alone,' he scolded the boy. In that moment, he spotted Marcus standing in the doorframe.

'At last you're here. I've been going crazy doing it all by myself.' The smile of relief covered his face. 'We're going to have a special antique auction. It's out of schedule. And a very important one. Some of the big shots will be betting on this stuff. By the way, it's

mostly Russian. I love Russian things. I've managed to get some very rare stuff and hope to make good money out of it.' Marcus listened to him silently. He wondered what Demetra would say if she knew they were selling the Old Russian art.

'Let me take my coat off and I'll be right back.' Marcus said and quickly went to his office. In no time he was back.

'You can go now. I think I can manage this by myself,' he said, sweeping in one glance the chaos reigning there.

'Thanks, I knew you're a good lad.' His boss smiled sweeping the sweat from his forehead with a crisp white handkerchief. The fatigue was clearly written on his fat face. Abruptly, Marcus' attention turned over to the arrival of two workers, rolling in a huge wooden crate.

'Wait, where are you going?' He called out. 'You should strip the wood before bringing this box here.'

'We're told it's full of fragile things, and we thought it would be better to open it in front of you,' one of the workers hesitantly replied.

'Alright, let's do it now,' Marcus immediately agreed and busied himself at supervising their work.

'We're going to use our main show room for this special event.' Marcus heard his boss's voice. Almost at once, a stranger entered, accompanied by Alan.

One glance at that man was enough for Marcus to see that he was someone of importance. Alan's humble and serviceable behaviour confirmed it.

'Here is our art manager, who knows better than me how to make the best display for getting the best results. Mr Blank, may I introduce you Mr Vanderson.' Alan Gordon was all courtesy and gentleness. Marcus moved forward them.

'It's nice here.' The man briskly nodded to Marcus ignoring any polite greetings. Marcus stood silent wondering how he should behave in such circumstances.

Even Alan Gordon was taken aback by Blank's attitude towards

Marcus. Few awkward seconds passed, as everyone seemed of not knowing what to do next.

'I was told you're a professional art consultant, aren't you?' Unexpectedly, Mr Blank addressed him in a condescending manner. The pompous expression written on his face made Marcus to boil inside. He involuntarily clenched his fists, wishing to punch him in that ugly face, sweeping away its self-important expression forever. But he didn't want to be at the same level as that man even by receiving the off-hand treatment. He would do better to put him in his place, than that.

Marcus straitened his back haughtily. With a mocking smile, he glanced down on Mr Blank who was a short man with bolded head and small black eyes scrutinising him insolently. His snobbery was shamelessly exposed. It was clear that the man was used to be served and revered.

'Yes, I am. At the moment.' Marcus arrogantly stated, his face expressing contempt and disregard. Mr Blank scornfully stared at him for a few seconds.

'I guess we'll better discuss our business in your office,' he turned to Alan, who stood quietly nearby and watched both men. Marcus noted the amusement on his face and decided it was due to his behaviour. He was not sure if it pleased or angered his boss, but no doubts he would have asked him later about that conceited little visitor.

When he was left alone, he analysed the recent event. He clearly remembered Demetra saying when she regained her consciousness, the first thing she saw was a small man with very bright small black eyes, scrutinising her. He looked pompous, although she couldn't confirm it afterwards. When her vision cleared up fully she saw a different man with different coloured eyes and a different voice. That voice was commanding. The other voice was obeying. 'Well, I must ask Demetra more about it,' Marcus thought and resumed his work.

The unexpected appearance of Kate irritated him at once. She

was Alan's secretary, but it seemed she liked getting her long nose in everything that was going on around her. She seemed to be partial to Marcus, who from the first day could not bear the sight of her but, was forced to be polite and civil.

'I've heard you're back,' she reached him, stopping at the distance was just enough for him to smell her strong perfume and deodorant. She was dressed as usual, provocatively. Her mini skirt was just long enough to cover her buttocks. She had a bright red top with fake rhinestones, which reflected the light. Cheap, Asian stuff, he thought, staring at her without replying.

'Hi, Marcus. I've missed you. It was boring here without you,' she smiled mockingly fluting her mascara-covered eyelashes.

'I'm back,' he cut her short, returning to his task.

'I've heard your wife was ill. Nothing serious I hope.' Kate followed him. She stood next to the open crate and looked into it: 'Wow, it's really here. I could never believe it would be on display.'

'What are you talking about?'

'That thing.' She pointed to the box with a green marking on the top.

'You know what's there, don't you?' Marcus asked.

'Of course, I do. It used to belong to one of my family acquaintances.'

'How did you know it would be here?'

'My uncle told me.'

'Your uncle?'

'Yes, Mr Bert Blank, who is one of the most important men in the City.' She arrogantly lifted her head: 'I don't think you'll ever meet him.'

'As a matter of fact, I've met him already. He's here with our boss.' Marcus remarked calmly.

'Is he?' A genuine surprise was in her voice.

'I guess he wanted to see firsthand what was offered.' Marcus played stupid.

'He never did, unless there is something very special here which may be of interest to him,' Kate speculated.

'I didn't know you were related to Mr Blank,' Marcus changed the subject.

'I didn't think it was needed to placate my family or my connections,' Kate stated in a metallic voice. She stood in her full height and arrogantly looking at him, she added: 'Uncle Bert is a very powerful man. My family is an ancient one. My ancestors came to Europe with Attila.'

'You meant with Huns, didn't you?' The surprise was in his voice.

'I didn't know there were two Attila. Of course, with Huns,' Kate coolly repeated.

'Look, here, I'm a newcomer. I don't know the history of Europe and England well. You shouldn't be hard on me,' Marcus changed his tactics, hoping she'd continue her story. He calculated right. She smiled at him and continued in a low soft voice.

'I know you didn't mean to be rude. It's me, who sometimes forget to be English. My Asiatic blood takes over me making me to behave as one.' Kate was apologetic now, making Marcus wonder about her change of mood. He wanted to know more about Bert Blank, but didn't dare to ask her. He decided to do it some other time.

Seeing him silent, Kate added: 'My family moved to England at the end of the seventeen hundreds. We came from Flanders with William Orange. The head of my family at that time, David Blank, was in the textile business. He was a very successful merchant.' Marcus glanced at her, trying to look impressed and gratified by her revelations. He knew he had succeeded as Kate winked at him. 'You don't need to worry of me getting in your way. I'm working just to be busy. I like to be among people. I enjoy crowds and their noise.' She smoothed her mini skirt and looked quizzically at him.

He didn't like the turn of things and he wondered how to get rid of her. He needed time to think about her words and what those

could mean for him and Demetra. To his luck, one of the workers was back, carrying a long flat parcel.

'Bring it here,' Marcus commanded, pointing to the table not far from him. 'Now I must continue with this,' he apologised to her, pointing at the table.

'Of course. See you later.' She friendly nodded to him and left.

Marcus was busy up to lunch time, directing and organising the working team. He wanted to finish the unpacking by the end of the day, not wanting to leave that work for the next day. But he was not sure he could make it. The number of boxes had been diminished but the objects of art were accumulating everywhere, making him to concern about their security. Those objects were rare, some very fragile and needed a special handling.

The box with a green marking, Marcus put aside to unwrap at the end. Curious of its contents, he glanced at it many times during the day wondering what was there. At last, he finished with the rest and took the box into his hands. He unwrap it carefully, removing one layer of bubbling paper after the other, until the object was in front of his eyes. It was an antique pitcher, a man's head, of porcelain. One glance at it told him it was Russian, from the mid-nineteenth century. He turned it upside-down and saw a marking of the Imperial Russian Court and the name of the manufacturer, Kuznetzov. All of those were in Cyrillic, proof of their authenticity. Marcus looked at the pitcher again. It presented one of the typical characters of that time. In that case, it was a happy, contented, face of a provincial landowner, slightly puffed from the drinking and lack of sleep. The piece was created so perfectly by an unknown master that looking at that laughing face for a little longer, Marcus began to feel it was a real face mocking at him. He had goose bumps, running on his back.

'To hell with it!' Quickly, Marcus placed the pitcher behind some other porcelain pieces. He didn't care to see it again.

He was still contemplating the pitcher, when he heard a commotion behind him.

'You are fast, my boy.' Alan Gordon looked impressed by Marcus' job. His broad smile and contented face told Marcus that he didn't need to worry about himself.

'Almost done.'

'I can see all the wooden crates are empty and the most of the carton boxes are too. Did you see the man? Mr Bert Blank? He is one of the biggest shots in London. Apart from the King. I hope to make good money on this event. Do your best and we'll be winners.' He winked at Marcus.

'Who is he?' Marcus asked hoping to get some more information.

'Big money man,' Alan winked again but didn't explain himself. Marcus decided not to press on that subject. He could have done it later on.

'Did you get some ideas about the display?' Alan changed the subject.

'Not yet. Let me see the items, at least most of them, before deciding about their arrangement,' Marcus sounded business-like again. He would have been the last one to let Alan know how he, Marcus, was interested in Bert Blank.

* * *

'What a delicious aroma! Isn't it spaghetti with *takaungu* sauce? I am famished today,' Marcus entered their flat and went directly to the kitchen. He stopped near the door watching Demetra mixing something with a wooden spoon. She didn't hear him, being busy with her cooking.

'Demetra!' He called her again. She turned at last and her smile was so sweet that Marcus felt guilty of asking her again about her terrible ordeal.

'Oh, I am so glad you're back. It was a long day without you. I'm cooking something special for you.' She looked at him again and her face changed its expression.

'You're tired, aren't you? And you're worrying about something, aren't you? Tell me about your day. Did something happen at your office today?' Demetra poured her questions at him.

'Nothing special. Just a lot of work. We're arranging a display for the preview of an auction,' Marcus replied, not wanting to go into details.

'In this case, go change yourself, then wash your hands and I'll be ready to serve our dinner,' Demetra commanded.

'Not yet. It's too early for dinner,' Marcus said, not catching her joke in time. Then he laughed loud at his thick-mind, stepped closer to his wife and picked her a quick kiss on her cheek. 'I'll be ready soon,' he laughed again and disappeared from her view.

As the meal progressed, Marcus didn't have the courage to ask Demetra about Bert Blank. He decided to wait after coffee. But seeing her happy and relaxed face, he thought that there was nothing wrong in waiting for a few more days until she will be stronger. Maybe then she could easily handle that matter.

* * *

During the whole time she had spent at home, recovering from her ordeal, she knew it was essential for her to find out about Joseph Dreher as much as possible. The only person whom she could trust was Roy. That day was a right moment for it.

They went to the 'Bridges'. It was, as usual, full of clients and very loud music, exactly what Demetra needed. They lined in queue, which seemed not to move at all and Demetra began to worry she would not have enough time to speak to him.

But her fears were groundless. It took them less than ten minutes to get their meal.

'Let's go there,' she nodded to the space, where the half-wall was of glass and they could look at the garden. By chance, one table not far from them was just vacated and they rushed to get it.

'Today we're lucky,' Roy smiled, putting his tray on the table.

'Why not!' Demetra laughed, knowing she may still have a chance to ask him about Joseph Dreher.

They ate in silence, admiring the late autumn garden. The yellow, red and pale green leaves were on the ground and some of them were slowly flying in the air. No water was running from

the fountain. It looked like it was prepared for winter. Demetra remembered the rich gardens of Viking Wish and swallowed hard to stop the tears from coming to her eyes. Only now she appreciated the elegance, richness and artful landscaping of her home country.

'How fast time is passing by! Just a few weeks ago we were here and it was still warm and sunny. And now? Look at this gloomy garden,' Roy sadly said.

'I thought about that, too,' Demetra replied and quickly asked: 'Do you know Joseph Dreher well? I'm curious about him.'

'Are you?'

'Not really about him. I'm just curious about someone like him. What I'm trying to say, well, I'll better explain. I have my own office. You've your own office. But somebody like Joseph, what kind of office has he?'

'Ah, you're curious about the low-graded employees. I was like you before. I wondered about their positions and place of work. You'll be surprised to know someone like Joseph is the most fortunate of us all. His job is simple and highly paid. He has no fixed office hours and… 'Roy stopped, reading impatience on her face.

'So he has no office, really?' Demetra prompted.

'No, he hasn't. All carriers are sharing one big room. Everyone has his own key locker and file cabinet. In the middle of that room there is a long rectory table which everyone uses when needed,' Roy explained.

'I'm glad I have my office. It must be very inconvenient to write something with someone who may read it over your shoulder.'

'You're carrying it too far. Carriers do not write anything. They're just called to the bosses, given locked briefcases and told where to go. As I've heard, Joseph is one of those who is regarded as one of the best and his missions are the most important and, I could say, the most secret,' Roy said, lifting his eyebrows.

'I hope he's paid enough for his efforts,' she added.

'Don't worry, those carrier's earnings are in no less than six-figure numbers, I've been told.'

'I guess they deserve it,' Demetra said and looked at the garden again. Shifting her eyes slightly, she spotted on the glass the reflection of a man who stood near the tall counter, drinking something. The goose skin ran down her spine. She got a bad premonition, although she didn't know why. She wanted to turn her head to look better at the man but she didn't dare him to know she had noticed him.

'How is the main course today?' It was Roy again with his stupid questions, she thought.

'Excellent,' she replied glancing at him. When she looked at the glass again, the man was gone.

* * *

Demetra entered the tube station. She quickly went through the ticket machine and was on her way to the stairs when she felt a heavy hand on her right shoulder.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' She cried and sharply turned to face the intruder. To her amazement, it was Joseph Dreher. He signed her to keep quiet and withdrew his hand from her shoulder. Taking her by the elbow, he propelled her to the stairs leading to the trains.

'I'm not ready for a second kidnapping,' Demetra stated, abruptly stopping.

'I'm your friend. I was told by Liz Issel, you know her, to help you. Sorry for that ordeal, but I didn't know that you were a relative of the Issel's family. Although, it's strange you've been treated so badly by somebody,' he whispered to her.

Demetra didn't know what to think. As soon as she heard Liz's name, she thought he could not know it without having been informed by Liz herself. And since Marcus called Alexis, for sure Liz decided to help.

'I must tell you some things but it is very difficult to find a place which can be safe for us.' He lifted his eyebrows and Demetra knew he meant the CCTV and moles.

'Let us take your usual train. It's full of people and noise and I

can tell you what I want.' He let her go and walked apart pretending to be a stranger.

They managed to enter into the car. Squeezed between others, they were pushed one onto the other. It was exactly what Joseph wanted. He slightly bent to reach for her ear and whispered.

'I'm just an employee, as you are. The difference between us is that my boss trusts me and not you. She, you know who, asked me to watch over you so that no harm could come to you. I promised to her to do it. Although, I have my own reasons for wanting to protect you as long as I can. I would like to speak with your husband.' Reading the unsaid question, he quickly added: 'I know how to find him. See you.'

Joseph Dreher left her after two stops and she continued alone. To say that she was shocked would not be true. She knew for whom he worked. But how could she trust him? Again and again she felt alone and lost in that alien world. What could she do? What?

She looked around and saw the carriage with new eyes. What a sight it was! The empty coffee cups and tins, loose sheets of newspapers, discarded covers of snacks and sandwiches were littering the floor and window sills. All that rubbish was ignored by the passengers. And what kind of passengers they were! A young sport-looking man sat sprawling with his long legs stretched forward. He closed his eyes pretending to sleep since an old lady has been standing not so far from him. Next to him there was a young teenage girl with IPOD speakers in her ears. She was enjoying rock music on such a high volume that everyone could listen to it, too. In her hand she held a newspaper and looked into it pretending not to see the old lady. Across from her, there was a Japanese family of five taking five seats. The old English lady had been standing in front of the three boys aged 3, 5 and 8 who sat comfortably and talked among themselves. None of their parents thought of taking a small boy of three on the lap and offer the seat to the elderly woman. It looked like England had lost its status of being the most well-mannered country in the Europe.

On impulse, Demetra wanted to shout at those people to make them feel ashamed at their treatment of the old lady, but she did nothing, knowing it would have been useless. All of those people would have looked at her as pariah, the old lady would categorically refuse to take the vacant place and she, Demetra, would have been wrong.

She turned away to look into the window but the couch was reflected on the glass. At first she noted there were no white people except for her, the sleeping young man and the old lady. The thought ran through her mind about what was she doing in that country. She was like Alice in Wonderland: everything was alien and somehow familiar. She turned away and leant on the door looking at the floor. The dirty unkempt feet in open sandals and the mini skirt of that girl was so short that one could glimpse her black slip, made her feel nauseous. Demetra shifted her eyes up and noted the board running on the length of the couch. It was covered with advertisements. And what kind of advertisements there were! There was everything, from praying groups to the call girls' telephone numbers, not forgetting the gays as well. She was not in a good mood after her encounter with Joseph Dreher, but her observations inside the couch made her wish to be back home. For her, Karsland looked like an Earth paradise in comparison with London's best.

As soon as the car doors opened on her station, she got out and ran to the escalator and then up to the exit, without stopping. She wanted to be out of there, out of all that happened to her and miraculously to find herself back in Karsland, in her cosy, big house and comfortable job, which she missed dearly.

Ten minutes walk until she reached the flat was enough time for her to calm down and put herself together. Marcus didn't have to see her in such agitated state and especially she couldn't mention her nostalgia home.

'Are you sure Roy didn't notice your particular interest in Joseph Dreher?' Marcus asked after hearing her long story.

'No, he didn't. Well, I think he didn't. But I cannot read his mind. I've put it like I wanted to know about their employment in the company. There is nothing wrong to be curious about that,' Demetra defended her stand.

'I hope so. Although, I've noticed a lot of people there are loudly laughing and roughly joking but it's only a play. Behind that joyful behaviour, they're hiding the calculated steps for retrieving information from the others. You cannot possibly believe those innocent expressions and answers. You must learn to recognise when they're sincere and when they're not.'

'Look, I thought he was sincere with me.'

'How about that man? Did you see him again on the street or in the office?'

'No, I didn't. But I could bet a hundred pounds that he's been watching over me.'

'Are you sure?'

'No, I'm not. I just had the nagging feeling that he was looking at me.'

'Maybe he liked you?'

'Don't speak nonsense. You know well, in London there are many young girls who are ready for everything to get some money. I'm of the age of their mothers.'

'Of course, you are. But you're attractive and expensively dressed and some gigolo may be looking for a new sucker.'

'Oh, Marcus, leave me alone. I cannot stand those terrible stories. Are you going to tell me about those grandmothers who go to the Caribbean to have a good time with young boys? It's vulgar and degrading.'

'I was joking. Forget about it. Let's go back on our subject. That carrier has no office of his own and there are no ways to find his schedule. But he spoke to you in the tube and you said he'll come to see me in my office. Is that so?'

'Exactly, these are his words.'

'I'd prefer to meet him somewhere else and ask him a few ques-

tions. Well, let's see if he'll get to my place at work.' Then Marcus changed the subject: 'Did you like your lunch with Roy? He must be in love with you already.'

'Don't joke at that poor man. His head reaches my shoulder and I'm not a tall woman. He's so short that sometimes I feel he's so conscious of it that he's uncomfortable in my or maybe in any other female company. He speaks very well about his wife. I hope he's happy with her.'

'Of course, he is. He's bringing good money home and any woman here would be glad to get a husband like him. He is truly married, isn't he?'

'Of course he is.'

'It's a big advantage for him. Most of the people here are not married. They're living, as they say, with partners. You must agree that a partner can never be equal to a wife or husband.'

'I know it already. I wonder what our Barbò would say hearing such stories.'

'They would be terrified and insecure. The same as all those who live without marriage.'

'Let's change the subject. It's very important. I should have told you before but I had no chance to. Over the past two weeks I've spent in the flat I had a lot of time to think and analyse many things which I didn't pay attention to before. It happened before the kidnapping. I went with Roy to his office, just to see it. He was very happy to show me the application of my programming to his piece of work. And do you know what happened there?' She stopped to take some breath and blurted out: 'He switched on his PC and during his demonstration of the application some out-dated sheets came out on screen. Do you want to know something? Those sheets were very similar to *those papers,*' she stopped, slowly nodding her head. Marcus understood her immediately.

'Are you sure?' He switched to the sign language.

'The characters of numbers and letters looked like the ones, but

it wouldn't be a bad idea to have another look at it. Could you get it now?'

'I would, but it's getting late for that. It takes time to get them from the secret place. Let's assume it's the same papers. It must be, unless your employment is a real thing.'

'Again, my employment. You're just teasing me but I'm getting annoyed every time when you remind me about my office. Don't you see I've been there for over three months and nothing happened with me or us?'

'Not counting your kidnapping.'

'It has nothing to do with my job. I work very hard to prove to everyone that I'm worth the money I'm paid. And you know it well. Back home me…'

'You were overstressed, overworked, never having a free minute for you not mentioning to marry and have children. That was a hell for your kind of person. Here you're not overstressed, nor overworked, having a lot of free time to go around with your beloved husband,' he smiled and stretched his arms to catch her. 'I guess it is time to prove it.'

* * *

Humming to himself, Marcus slowly walked from one showroom to the other, looking for displayed objects but not seeing any. He was in an excellent mood after being told that his performance was excellent during the auction and he was offered the permanent position and quite a generous salary. Alan presented him with a cheque for his work on the auction. It was a handsome sum. Marcus hoped Alan didn't notice his satisfaction.

'Ah, you here.' He turned at the familiar voice. Kate walked towards him. 'It looks like we are going to see each other for a long time, isn't it? She loudly laughed winking at him.

'Mm.' He just looked at her not wanting to engage into a conversation.

'We really could go for lunch together, couldn't we? I know a few nice and quite cheap places. Why don't we start today? Is it

not a good day to celebrate your employment? You are a permanent employee. Do you know how many hundred thousand and more would want to be in your position? You are the lucky guy and you should drink to it.' She stepped closer to him. He felt suffocated from her strong perfume.

'I don't think I will ever share my lunch with you. Somehow I believe in separating business from pleasure,' he stepped back from her to maintain the distance.

'Do you? I would never believe an attractive, smart man could refuse a lunch with an unattached, very young, very attractive woman. Unless you are already involved with somebody else.'

'Look, there is no point to continue this useless conversation. I must go on with my work,' Marcus cut her short praying for someone, anyone to show up in the room. His prayers were answered.

'Mr Vanderson, there is a gentleman who wants to see you. I showed him to your private office,' one of the helpers stood in the doorframe.

'You are lucky as usual.' Kate quickly uttered before disappearing into the adjoining room.

Marcus hurried to his cubicle. He stopped for a second to compose himself, and then he entered his office.

'I am Marcus Vanderson. Did you want to see me?' He faced a complete stranger who stood very straight holding a small carton box in his arms. He seemed under some kind of stress.

'Well, I'd be glad to be of help,' Marcus encouraged him.

At last, the man quickly glanced around the small office and stepped closer to Marcus. He whispered something so low that Marcus was forced to step even closer to him and ask: 'Could you repeat, please? I didn't hear you well.' The man opened his eyes wide moving them from one side to the other. Marcus caught the silent question.

'I don't know about that. You could write here.'

'No. I am Joseph Dreher.' At his words Marcus froze and looked into the man's eyes silently asking what he wants.

'This trivial thing I've had in my family for years, I want to appraise it,' the man pointed to the box in his arms. Changing the subject he gave Marcus the possibility to recover from the surprise and compose himself.

'Bring it here. On the table,' Marcus calmly said, but his brain was at its highest speed to find a possibility to speak to that man privately. He was not sure if his office was bugged but knowing that Big Brother watched everybody's movements in London, he wouldn't be surprised if Alan Gordon's offices were bugged as well.

The man opened the box, revealing the small porcelain dog.

'I guess it is Meissen.' Marcus turned it upside down. There were no markings.

'You can see it yourself. My guess is it could be anything.'

'Do you think it's worthless?'

'Or no, everything has its own price.' Marcus deliberately looked into the man's eyes.

'I want to show you one of the rarest dogs in our show room. It came in just a few days ago. Let's go.' Marcus got the idea that in the main showroom would have been possible to exchange a few words. Joseph Dreher quickly packed the dog back into the box and they left the office.

Marcus assumed correctly. The big room was empty and no one seemed to be around. They went to the tall display cabinet which was full of various porcelain pieces. Facing it, Marcus softly uttered. 'Well, what is the purpose of your visit?'

'I told your wife that I wanted to see you. I want you to have some papers. Those will secure your life here. No one can touch you knowing that you have *those papers*,' the man whispered.

'I don't know if I can trust you. You are working for dangerous people and you are their loyal servant. How can I be sure that this is not a set up?'

'Liz helped me several times and I promised her to help you. *Those papers* are your exit to real freedom. Believe me!'

'All right. I will take the risk.'

'I will leave them in your post box. I am not selling them but if you could give me some money, I'd be glad. My wife is very ill and I must keep a nurse for her. It takes all my salary. Sorry for begging but I know you are a generous man and money means nothing to you. You decide how much you can give me after getting familiar with the papers.'

They turned at the sound of steps. Alan Gordon and Kate entered the room. Marcus watched the face of Kate momentarily changed as she noticed Joseph, but almost at once it assumed its usual smile. She must know him, Marcus thought.

'Are you still here?' Alan glanced at his wristwatch. 'I thought you ran home to bring the good news to your wife.' Alan now glanced at Joseph Dreher. 'I can see you have a customer. Is there something interesting?'

'I don't want to be impolite, but the item,' Marcus pointed to Dreher's box,' is not of interest to us. There were no markings. I've suggested to Mr Dreher to try some other place,' Marcus turned to face Joseph.

'I guess I took too much of your time. Thank you for advice. I must leave now. Good evening.' Joseph Dreher bowed to everybody and left at once.

'What a strange man! I have got the impression that as soon as he saw us he decided to run away.' Alan Gordon shrugged his shoulders. 'Do you know him well? What did he really want?

'He brought some cheap porcelain junk and wanted to get some money. I am the wrong man for him. Here we don't deal with that kind of men or things.' Marcus shrugged his shoulders this time. Then he added. 'I wonder who sent him here. Kate, is he one of your acquaintances?'

'He's not a type with whom I may be acquainted. He looks like a low-paid employee,' she grimaced.

'Let us continue,' Alan Gordon turned to Kate, 'You must write a letter concerning that painting,' he said turning his back on Marcus and going to the other side of the room.

Left alone and presumably ignored, Marcus exhaled deeply. It looked like Alan and Kate didn't pay much attention to Joseph Dreher. Marcus hoped he had managed to deceive them.

'I will be in my office, if you need me. At least for another half hour.'

Alan just waved to him not bothering to turn or to say something. Kate pretended not to hear him at all.

* * *

'Could I drop in for a second? Teatime? I hope I'm not disturbing you. I hope that uncle will be home?' Kate called her aunt.

'My dear, you are always welcome. You are lucky, Uncle Bert promised me to be early today. The tree of us will have tea together. See you then.' Kate hung the receiver and absently looked in front of her.

'*Maybe I am wrong, but I am sure that man came to see Marcus. But why? What is the connection between them? How could they know each other? I think I must report this strange encounter to uncle Bert. It may be useful to him, since he told me to watch over Marcus,*' she thought, feeling miserable. She really liked that man. He was a real man. Few men like him were around nowadays. To get to see every day a real blond, tall, intelligent, good-looking man was a rarity in modern London. She hated to spy on him but Uncle Bert's orders were law for her and she didn't dare to disobey.

Kate sighed glancing at her wristwatch and rose from her chair. It was time to prepare herself for her outing.

Chapter 37

That day Demetra left her office two hours earlier than usual. She stopped at her local supermarket, being in love with it from her first visit there. She bought a few things needed to prepare a "*risotto ai funghi*" - one of Marcus's favourite dishes. She wanted it to be a surprise for him, her way to say she's alright now.

All the way back to her building, she hummed some cheerful melody from her schooldays. She was in an excellent mood. Her happy face seemed to astonish the porter who opened the door for her. His eyes bulged at her cheerful face.

'Good day, ma'am,' he politely mumbled. She lifted her eyebrows at his humble greeting that sounded odd coming from him. Something wrong with him today, she thought.

She went to the stairs ascending to the first floor. Turning around the corner, she walked on the long corridor. Reaching her flat, she put down her shopping bag on the carpet and got her handbag to retrieve her keys. Still humming her song, she unlocked the door and pushed it in. The door moved a few centimetres and stopped. She pushed it harder but it seemed something was blocking it from inside. What now? What's wrong with this door? There's always something wrong in this building! If it's the best of this city, I can it imagine what the worst is, she cursed, putting her handbag and briefcase next to her shopping bag. Then, gathering all her strength, she pushed on the door. This time the door opened enough for her to glimpse their sitting room. It looked as usual. With tremendous difficulty, she squeezed herself through the opening and turned her head to the left to see the obstacle.

On the floor blocking the door, laid a man. A thin line of dry blood crossed his face and his head was in a pool of blood, which

stained the carpet of the entrance. His eyes were open and looked directly at her. Demetra recognised him at once. It was Joseph Dreher. It should have been me, the quick thought entered her brain and without realising it, she began to scream. Her loud outcry was so ear-splitting that in no time the porter was next to her with some others coming from their flats and wondering what's happened there.

Someone pulled her back to the corridor and a few metres away from her flat. All her body was shaking violently. She looked terribly shocked and disoriented. They left her near the wall but her feet couldn't hold her and she slid to the floor and stayed there till someone put a hand on her shoulder. Demetra tried to shake it away but the hand held her firm.

'My dear, calm down,' she recognised the soft gentle voice of Lady Onslowe. 'You don't need to be so upset. You're not the first who's coming home and got such surprise. David, our porter, will call the police who'll know what to do,' she whispered to Demetra, who still sat dumbfounded and confused.

By then, the corridor was full of people, each trying to have a glance at the dead man. It took a few minutes till they heard the siren of the coming police. The sound of heavy boots on stairs confirmed the presence of law reinforcement forces.

'Which flat?' asked the commanding voice and the heavy steps neared to Demetra, who had been sitting on carpeted floor and still was under the shock.

'Clear up the area! Who's seen something can stay, the rest of you, return to your flats,' the policeman commanded, looking around him. The small crowd near the door immediately dispersed. Without counting the porter, no one was left around except for Demetra and Lady Onslowe, who continued to hover above her.

'The Vandersons live there. Mrs Vanderson came home and found that man,' Lady Onslowe explained haughtily pointing in direction of Demetra.

'Of course, you saw nothing and nothing can be added to your statement.' The officer said to Lady Onslowe, who arrogantly lifted her chin and didn't care to reply.

'Well, let's see what's there.' With all his power he pushed the door. Under his force it opened wider and he squeezed through it into the flat. Then the door was closed. They heard something being moved and almost at once the door opened wide. Lady Onslowe quickly went to the door.

'It's not a nice view, ma'am,' the porter stood at the doorframe blocking the entrance.

'Could I be of some help?' She asked, peeping behind his shoulder.

'It's not a display. Don't block the door,' the officer rudely barked at her, 'it's a crime scene and no one can enter it.'

'Is he dead?' Lady Onslowe's voice slightly trembled.

'I guess he is,' the porter frowned at her. She returned to Demetra, who looked at her with horrified eyes.

'Dead?' She repeated, as not understanding the meaning. Lady Onslowe didn't reply, just stood next to her.

After a while, a new commotion could be heard downstairs. Then several people in plain clothes, some of them carrying big metal cases, arrived to the flat.

'Where's he? Who moved him? Why? Who found it? Don't touch anything!' Those and many other questions could be heard coming from the flat. Men moving out and in made Demetra to regain her whereabouts.

'Where is my bag? My shopping? I need to cook dinner.' Spotting her things on the carpet some way from her, she lifted her head and met the eyes of policeman, who stood at the entrance of her flat. His face was grim and unreadable.

'I hope he'll be watching my clothes as well.' Finding her thought incongruous, she began to laugh and couldn't stop.

'Oh, my dear, what's wrong with you. There is nothing to laugh about.' The old lady pulled her by the sleeve but Demetra unex-

pectedly threw her head back, hitting it on the wall and continued her loud laughing.

'What's the matter with her?' The man in plain clothes, presumably inspector for investigation, stepped out into the corridor and walked toward the women.

'I guess she's in shock. You should call her husband. He's at work...,' Lady Onslowe began and stopped looking at her wristwatch. 'He'll be back in half an hour. He's never late.'

'How do you know?' The officer got curious.

'Well, I don't know exactly but they're such a united couple and doing everything together, that I guess he'll be back in time. He...,' she stammered. The man studied her wrinkled face, grey hair and very thin figure. It was difficult to figure out what he thought, but he seemed satisfied with her answer. He turned his back at them and returned to the flat.

Demetra's nervous laugh brought hysterics with loud cries, and then to sobs. Her body was violently shaking and, by the time Marcus entered the corridor, she was in a poor state.

'What's going on here?' At the sight of Demetra sitting on the floor and violently shaking, he ran to her. Plopping next to her, he took her in his arms.

'What's wrong with you? Did someone hurt you?' He murmured into her ear. His tender cares seemed to work, her shaking decreased and her sobs were less loud. She hid her face in his chest and slowly began to calm down.

'She's in shock. She's found a dead man in your flat.' Lady Onslowe whispered, not wanting Demetra to hear her. Marcus shuddered at her words.

'Dead man?' His voice sounded unbelievable.

'I'll be back, my dear. Wait for a second.' He stood on his feet and quickly strove to the flat.

'It's my flat. What's going on here?' He shouted, stopping in the doorframe. The scene in front of him was one of those TV police stories. The body of the dead man was on the floor in a pool of

blood. One of the men dressed in white, mono-use gear hovered above him with a camera, taking one shot after the other; the rest of the team, similarly clad, was methodically searching their flat and covering everything with white stuff, looking for fingerprints. Marcus got furious at once.

'What's going on here? Who's in charge of these people? It's my flat. You're destroying my property, my belongings,' he shouted trying to be heard above the sound of the metal detector. Abruptly, the deafening sound stopped.

'I'm in charge. My name is John White. I'm Chief Inspector of Homicide Department. Is this your flat?' The calm low voice belonged to the tall, lean man in black leather coat. He reminded Marcus of one of those who brought them from the airport.

'Yes, it is. My wife found that… thing,' he pointed at the body. The goose bumps ran on his back as he recognised Joseph Dreher. He forced himself to keep calm and composed outside for not betraying his turmoil inside.

'She's in shock now. You should have helped her before beginning all this.' Marcus pointed his finger in the direction of the team. 'Why didn't you call an ambulance? She needed medical assistance.'

'We want to hear her story before she'd be gone to the hospital. Also, you need your flat as soon as possible. We're trying to finish our job quickly, so that you could get in possession of your things again. I hope you'll agree with me, won't you?' The man briskly stated. Listening to him, Marcus relaxed, finding some logic in his words.

'And when do you think you'll finish your job?'

'Over the next two-three hours. You're lucky your flat is a small one and there are not many rooms to examine. Please leave here now, but be available to us at any moment. Soon I want to question your wife. Do you think she'll be up to it?'

'No. She's in shock. My wife is a very ill woman.' Then an idea came to his mind. 'Can I take some medicine for her?'

'Well, it's against rules, but we have a medical examiner here. You can get your medicine under his supervision. Just a moment.' He turned from Marcus and shouted to someone: 'Come here, doc. I need you in the sitting room.'

'What do you want?' The man dressed in white uniform with white cap and rubber gloves rudely asked. 'I don't have time for a talk.'

'Mr Vanderson lives here. Mrs Vanderson found that body. She's in shock. Mr Vanderson told me his wife needs some medicine which is here in the flat. Will you get it for him?'

'You know better than me, it's against our regulations to remove anything from the crime scene,' the doctor said, authoritatively. But glimpsing the desperate expression on Marcus face, he smiled and added. 'Just for today. Where is that medicine?'

'I'll show you,' Marcus said and went to the bedroom. Both men followed him. He went to her wardrobe which was already wide-opened by someone and took out the red cool box which was on the lower shelf. He put it on top of the bed and lifted the cover.

'There's a complete pharmacy here, isn't there?' The doctor exclaimed glancing behind his shoulder.

'I've explained to the inspector that my wife is a very ill woman.'

'Take what you need quickly and leave here fast,' the officer said, suddenly losing his patience. Marcus didn't need more reminders. He grabbed some of her tranquillisers. Replacing the cover and putting back the medicine box on its place, he turned to face the men.

'Thanks for the medicine. We'll be waiting for you in the corridor. We've nowhere to go. Don't call an ambulance. I guess my wife will feel better after taking her own medicine. She hates hospitals,' he said and went out without waiting for a reply.

'What do you think about that medicine box?' Marcus heard chief inspector's voice. The doctor's answer was lost to the sound of a policeman, who in a loud commanding voice, ordered him to clear the entrance.

It took more than five hours for the scientific team to complete their work and the body was taken away in a metal box. During this period, the inspector came out into the corridor a few times and went toward them but one glance at Demetra was enough to change his mind about questioning her.

Demetra presented a poor sight. After taking some medicine brought by Marcus, she relaxed and dozed on his shoulder. When she woke up, she was too calm, giving the impression of being under strong drugs. And she was. Marcus was hungry but didn't dare to offer her go out to eat something outside. He got a baguette from her shopping bag and munched it slowly, wondering if he could get something to drink.

There were only two of them now. Lady Onslowe returned to her flat as soon as Marcus arrived and the porter was back to his post in the lounge. A fleeting thought passed his mind finding it strange that the old lady, who seemed to care for Demetra, didn't offer her the comfort of a sofa or an armchair in her flat, but knowing the British of being reserved and cold people, Marcus decided it was normal for them. No one brought them some chairs and they continued to sit on the floor in the corridor and wait for the permission to re-enter their flat. Marcus wondered if all that blood absorbed by the carpet in the entrance hall could be removed by some chemical. He didn't care for Demetra to see it every day.

'Mr Vanderson, could I speak with you for a moment?' The Chief Inspector White was back to them. At his words, Demetra pulled closer to Marcus who was not sure if it was a good idea to leave her alone. Despite of it, he stood up.

'I'll be back very soon. Let me see what they want from me. Do you want me to ask Lady Onslowe to keep you company till I'll be back?' He offered.

'No, don't bother. I'm alright. I'm really alright now,' she insisted, giving him her hand. He took it and lightly squeezed it. 'I'll be back soon,' he repeated and looked at the officer patiently waiting for him.

Marcus hardly recognised the flat. Their tidy, trim and elegant sitting room had been transformed into the team's headquarters with their dining table acting as a writing desk and the coffee table as a laboratory bench. The team of five, Marcus managed to count all of them, sat on the sofa and chairs, seemingly taking a break.

'I guess we'll be better off in the other room,' the inspector said and they moved there. Bedroom was no better than the sitting room, with white powder stains all around them. It was clear someone tried to clean up but didn't succeed. Marcus looked around him wondering what would be next.

'I know at present there is no way to ask you all that I want to. I just want to know one thing. You saw that dead man when you came in here. Do you know him?'

'No, I don't. I've never seen him in my life.' He'll be damned if he'll admit of knowing the dead man.

'Do you think your wife knew that man?'

'I don't think so. We came to this country quite recently.'

'Do you think your wife is feeling well enough to be asked a few questions?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well, let me try to speak to her in your presence. It might give her some courage to answer some of my questions,' the officer insisted.

'Well, I'll be frank with you. Since our arrival to London, we have been experiencing quite a number of unpleasant things. My wife has been under stress for all this time and I don't want her to get more ill than she is.'

'Alright, I'm going to ask her only one question in your presence. I'll do it in the corridor for her comfort,' the inspector said and turned to the door. On their return, they found Demetra as they had left her.

'Mrs Vanderson, I am Chief Inspector White. I'm in charge of this case. I spoke with your husband and he thought you're in

condition to answer just one question. Are you?' The man hovered above her. Demetra lifted her head and looked up at him. After a while she silently nodded to him. He squatted facing her.

'I need to know if you knew the dead man.' His question took her by surprise. Her face changed from calm to agitate. Red stains covered her cheeks and she lowered her head, hiding her eyes. She kept silent. The inspector exchanged glances with Marcus who, at the first sight of her discomfort, sat near her and took her hand.

'You don't need to worry about an answer. In the end they will find out by themselves. I guess the inspector wants to start this case. It's a crucial point. If you don't know this man, he may be just a thief. If you knew him, why did he come here? You knew this man, didn't you?' Marcus was gentle and comforting wanting to hear her reply and be free at last from all those people who ruined their evening. At his words, Demetra seemed to relax again but it took a long time until she bent closer to him and whispered into his ear. 'That man is Joseph Dreher.'

'My wife said she knew the man. His name is Joseph Dreher. He worked in the same building with her,' Marcus slowly uttered, keeping his composure.

'Of course, he knew her and came to her apartment. But why? What's so important that made him to be here? And who killed him?' The inspector quickly thought, rising to his feet.

'Thank you, Mrs Vanderson. Good evening,' he said and left them.

'Why did you insist on my reply? I didn't want to tell them I knew the man. Except for Roy, no one knew I've met him before,' Demetra blamed her husband.

'You're wrong here. Don't forget he was on the same plane with us. You could have remembered him from there. No one can believe after several hours sitting together in such close space, you didn't see him at all unless no one could find out he was on that plane.'

'I'm sick and tired of all these things happening to us. It's the third time we're involved in a chaos in this country,' Demetra suddenly sobbed.

'I know, but what can I do to stop all these things? There is only one thing to do. You know what, although I'm not sure it will help to leave us in peace.'

'And what will be of us now? We need some kind of help. Lawyer?' Demetra asked.

'I guess you're right. Tomorrow I'll ask my boss if he could recommend someone to us. Do you agree, my dear?' He kissed her on her cheek.

'You know I always agree with you,' she smiled through her tears.

'And no more tears. We have nothing to do with that man. If somebody decided to kill him in our flat, let criminal police to find out who did it,' Marcus concluded.

* * *

It took another hour for the team to collect its equipment and to clean up after them. At last, they were allowed to enter the flat. Wondering about the state of the flat, uncertain of its condition and unsure of the circumstances that brought them to that case, Marcus lifted up Demetra until she stood firm on her feet and, putting his arm around her waist, he directed her to the entrance of their flat silently hoping the blood stains were washed away by the scientific team.

Demetra went directly to the bed. She plopped into it and stretching herself on top of the cover; she closed her eyes and relaxed. Then she felt there was something wrong with the bed but she could not figure out what.

'Marcus, could you please come here for a second,' she shouted across the room.

'Just a moment,' he shouted back, but it took him a few minutes to come in.

'What's wrong?' He sounded irritated. He was tired and hungry and fed up with their present life.

'Something is wrong with this bed. Did they overturn our bed as well?'

'I don't think so. When I came to pick up your medicine, our bed was intact. It's difficult to say what they did afterwards. What's the matter with it?'

'There is some kind of bump. Could you help me to lift the mattress?' Demetra asked, rising to her feet.

'Let us see what's there.' Marcus agreed. Together they lifted the heavy mattress and there it was, the thick brown envelope, lying on Demetra's side of the bed.

'What a treasure!'

'Don't touch it!'

'I'm near you. Don't shout! I don't think it's a dangerous pack. I think I know what it is.' He replied and lifted the envelope from the bed. They dropped the mattress, which fell into place, and sat on the top of it.

'This is the reason why Joseph was murdered today,' Marcus signed to her.

'How do you know?'

'He told me about some documents and I agreed to have them. I just don't understand why he entered our flat on his own and left this envelope as he did. He could simply give it to me. Strange man.'

'Maybe he found out that somebody was watching him. He decided to enter our flat when we're out and leave it for us. I suppose he took the spare key from the porter's box downstairs,' Demetra guessed.

'That's it. But if you hadn't felt that bump, these documents would have stayed here who knows for how long.'

'I don't agree with you. Maybe he planned to tell me about this envelope tomorrow. Just a few words, something as 'look under your mattress', 'check your bed',' Demetra guessed.

'We are never going to find out what poor Joseph Dreher had planned. Someone made sure he could never speak again. I just

wonder who could be so brave to kill him inside our flat. It must be someone who followed him.' Marcus signed again.

'I think it must be that big black porter. He has a face of… well, I don't want to be unfair, but he is so big and looks so mean that I could expect anything from him.' Demetra signed.

'I would agree with you except he's employed as a porter and usually those people are checked by police before hiring. They should have a clean police record. He cannot be a criminal,' Marcus signed to her.

'In this case, the killer must be somebody who followed the poor man up to our flat. I still cannot figure out how somebody could enter this building and walk on the corridor without being registered by CCTV. Do you remember our first flat adventure with the pack from the University?' Demetra said.

'I agree with you. It means there was somebody who managed to block the cameras and shoot the man. It is not so easy to block CCTV.' He stopped seeing Demetra had lain down again, with her eyes closed.

'Let that inspector figure out who was here and why. I guess he is a specialist on homicide and knows what to do. Last year London beat the rest of the world's cities by the number of murders,' Marcus signed. Then he added: 'I am sorry, my dear that you have to face all these things. Sometimes I blame myself for taking you away from Karsland, from your comfortable house and quiet life.' He stopped, seeing Demetra fell asleep at last.

He looked down at the envelope, which he was still holding in his hands.

Then he went to the sitting room, took his place on the sofa and glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to midnight. 'I should go to bed too, but I'll be damned if I don't see what's inside,' he thought, rising from his seat to pick up the knife.

Swiftly he cut the envelope and looked into it. There was one box file tied with a yellow ribbon. He took it out and placed it on the table. With slightly shaking hands, Marcus undid the ribbon

and opened the folder. The first thing that caught his attention was a photo of Bert Blank. On the bottom of it was written: the President, the Spider Group branch in London.

For a long time, he looked at the photo and its description and still had difficulties to believe it was real. He picked it up and held it in his hand. A thousand thoughts ran through his head. *It was true*, he thought. All those years he heard whispers and hints about some powerful secret organisation, but there were no proofs or anything which could indicate its existence. As for him, he partially believed in its existence and partially discarded it as a rumour without foundation. That photo put down all his doubts. It was a proof and an undisputable one.

He set the photo aside and began to look through the papers. There was a dossier completed by some unknown person. It was the full story of the organisation, starting from its beginning and up to present.

It was early morning when Marcus finished reading the last sheet of the folder. He neatly arranged the papers, closed the box and tied it with the ribbon, as it was before. He leaned on the back of the sofa and looked at the ceiling. He was so overwhelmed by those papers that he lost the capacity to analyse or absorb the information he had gathered. 'Should I talk about it with Demetra? She'll get crazy, I guess. What should I do with these papers? Where can I hide them?' These and many more thoughts crowded in his head until he got a splitting headache.

He was tired and bored to death of all those things happening to them. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on one thought only: how to escape from those odious people without being found by them. With that thought, he fell asleep on the sofa.

* * *

'Of course, I know one. My brother, Simon, is a well-known solicitor who can take your case at once.' Alan Gordon was ready with the answer.

'Thanks.' Marcus quickly agreed, hiding his apprehension. He

wasn't so happy to get involved with a close relative of his boss, who would have first hand information about all his private matters. It wasn't a secret that British people loved to expose the skeletons from their cupboards in public; the press brought out at least one piquant case regarding prominent families almost every day.

As for himself, Marcus didn't care about publicity, which would have started as soon as police would start the investigation. One of that day's gossip newspapers already mentioned the murder committed in Chelsea, but without revealing any names. It was just a matter of time before their names will be in blocks letters on the first page of each daily newspaper. His concern was Demetra, who was so sensible and fragile, and he could predict her reaction at seeing her name in bold letters. The text will contain several versions of the possible murder and one would mention Demetra's involvement in the killing.

Marcus knew he would do his best to ignore all unpleasantness created by Dreher's murder and brush aside the fact that Simon Gordon would probably be the same as his brother: noisy, loud, vulgar to the point of boorishness. Marcus had the only hope that, being employed by Alan, his brother may have a real interest in helping him; winning the case will prevent any slander to Alan's business. There were no ways to know that, unless he'd try to contact the man.

'I'll call him and set an appointment for you. Don't worry. He'll take care of everything. You'll be out of that business sooner than you think.' Alan confidently assured him.

'Thanks again.'

'By the way, do you remember that Russian painting of Shishkov 'Summer in the forest'?' Alan changed the subject.

'Of course, I do. I'm the one who prepared that pamphlet about Russian artists of the nineteenth century.'

'It fetched over five hundred thousand pounds.'

'I cannot believe it. It's just slightly more than thirty by thirty centimetres. Who could pay such money for that?'

'Russian paintings are rare. It was a phone bid, as you could imagine. There was not too many who could dare to show up here and bid for such sum.'

'I would think so.'

'You did an excellent job at advertising it and I'm glad for you to be getting a high commission.'

'Thanks. I need that money. I wonder how much your brother will charge me.'

'I don't know but I can assure you that his fees are no higher than any other solicitors,' Alan assured him.

* * *

It was a big surprise for Marcus to find out that Simon Gordon was Alan's twin brother. They were identical twins and Marcus had difficulty to speak to Simon, since he thought he was facing Alan. But as soon as Simon began to talk, Marcus realised in front of him was a completely different type of person.

Simon Gordon was a soft speaking, reserved and genteel person who was diametrically different from his twin. Dressed in a navy blue suit with a light blue shirt and a burgundy tie, he looked as stepping out of the nineteen-eighties, the time of the last good classical fashion.

'How do you do? My wife and I thought it will be prudent of us to get a solicitor who could help us in case we needed one. I work for your brother and he recommended you,' Marcus introduced himself.

'I know. He told me about your problem. There is no need for you to tell me what's happened in your flat. Alan gave me a good picture of all the events. We must wait and see the next move of the police. Do not speak with them without my presence. They can be quite unpleasant sometimes,' Simon said and then continued: 'I'm glad to be of help. For whatever you need me, don't hesitate to call at any time: day or night. I'm available for my clients around the clock.'

'Thanks. I'll keep it in mind.' Marcus smiled.

He glanced around the office. It was huge, the parquet floor covered with oriental rugs, heavy wooden furniture, darkened by age, solid oak desk with an Italian leather writing set on top of it; walls covered with glassed cabinets full of leather bond books. It was an impressive office bespeaking wealth and upper class clients. There was no mentioning about the fees, making Marcus to wonder if he could afford his services.

Chapter 38

The following day Demetra went to her office as nothing happened and did her best to behave as usual. Roy was the only person with whom she shared her news. He listened to her with grim face, without trying to hide his worries.

'I cannot figure out why he came to our flat, how he managed to enter it and at the end being killed by someone there. It's incongruous! Devils' work!' Demetra whispered to Roy. 'Why? What did he do? Who was it?'

'It's a mystery. I wish I could help you understand. The only people who can solve it are the police. Let's hope that inspector is a good man and knows his job, if not unless they could accuse you for killing that man.'

'Me? What I have to do with him? I've never in my life possessed or held a gun. I don't know how to use it.' Demetra was shocked.

'I know. But for the police any of us is a potential criminal, even by law one is innocent, until proven guilty,' Roy stated.

And no later than that evening, Demetra was to remember his words, when she faced the Chief Inspector White in her sitting room.

'Mrs Vanderson, I hope I'm not disturbing you. I'll take no more than two minutes of your time. Just two minutes,' he said as soon as she opened the door. At first Demetra wanted to refuse him the entrance, but the curiosity of Eve took over and she let him in.

She didn't offer the inspector to remove his coat, indicating his stay had to be no longer than he requested. They stepped into the sitting room and she pointed a chair to him. He sat and leaned on its back. Demetra took her usual place on the sofa and waited for him to speak.

'I can see you've recovered from your shock. I know from my

own experience that it's a very terrible thing to see a homicide case. Well, let's hope it's the first and the last time you have to face such thing. You told me that you knew that man, Joseph Dreher, or better to say, he worked in the same building as you. I need to know if you knew him personally or just saw him there. Could you tell me more about your connections with that man?' The chief inspector asked.

'I saw him in the corridor speaking with my boss. I haven't been acquainted with him closely. I cannot imagine why he decided to come to our flat, or what he wanted from us. It's a mystery to me. I just don't know why.'

'You're saying that the only time you saw that man was at your place of work, aren't you?' The man asked her again. After a short pause, Demetra nodded confirming his words but she didn't speak. He studied her face expression and something in it seemed not convincing to him. But he didn't press her again.

'I've heard you've been kidnapped not so long ago, haven't you?' At her confirming nod, he continued: 'Do you think the killing of Dreher and your kidnapping can be connected?'

'I don't know,' Demetra got surprised at his words. She could never connect those two events, but now she began to think over about it. She remembered the call of Joseph Dreher to her on the day of her kidnapping. It had to be a coincidence, so she brushed aside that thought. The inspector closely watched her face, giving her the impression of reading her thoughts.

'I am sure there are no connections between these two events. At least, I don't see them,' she quickly replied, wanting to close the subject. But it couldn't be so.

'Do you think you could identify your kidnappers? Or the place where they've kept you?' He asked.

'I didn't report about my kidnapping. How did you know about it? You said you've heard about it? From who?' Demetra countered him.

'I cannot tell you our source of information. I have been told

about it. Nothing more. This is why I am asking you about your kidnappers. It is possible that they are watching your building and it could have something to do with Joseph Dreher or somebody else.'

'I was kidnapped by two men wearing ski masks. I cannot identify them, since I fell unconscious and woke up in a strange room. I figured it was a basement room. There were two men, but one I cannot remember clearly and the second was with me all the time. I don't know who brought me back since my face was covered with a scarf. I was left at the Victoria Station. My husband came to collect me from there. This is the entire story,' Demetra stated.

'What did they want from you?' His question took her by surprise. Under no circumstances she could have told him about *these papers*. She couldn't trust anyone, especially a policeman.

'At the beginning they wanted money. When they saw I wasn't strong enough, you know, I fell unconscious for quite a long time, they seemed to have changed their mind and decided to let me go,' Demetra made the story up. She looked at the inspector but his face was unreadable and she couldn't figure out if he caught her bait. He didn't rush with his next question, taking his time to prepare her for it.

'Can you shoot? Have you ever had a hunting licence?'

'Me?' Demetra was taken aback by his questions so much that she wasn't able to construct the right answer. She just looked at him.

'I thought so. You don't give the impression of being a Nikita-type,' the inspector quickly said, as apologising for his question. Demetra was silent. She thought it was going too far and she was already sorry for letting him in. She should have never spoken to him without Marcus, she thought. She glanced at her wristwatch.

'My husband will be home shortly. If you have no more questions for me, I have some things to do.' She got up from her seat.

The officer took it as the end of his interview. He wanted to know more about her, her life and the country where she came from, but there were no ways to force her to speak. That woman was too smart to make a false step, as her replies showed to him.

'I guess my two minutes are over. Thank you for your time. Good evening.' He rose from his chair and turned to the door.

'Good evening, inspector.' Demetra quickly went to open the door for him. In that moment she heard the key turning in the lock. The main door opened wide revealing Marcus.

'Oh, what a surprise! Good evening, inspector.' He greeted the man cheerfully.

'Good evening, Mr Vanderson. Mrs Vanderson was so kind to offer me two minutes of her time.'

'Is that so?' Marcus raised his eyebrows.

'I just asked her a few questions which she was so kind to answer.'

'Was she? You know well you've no right to be here. Not speaking about interrogating my wife without the presence of her solicitor,' Marcus angered.

'I would never do such thing. Ask her yourself about my questions and you'll see I didn't interrogate her.' He turned to Demetra. 'Could you please repeat to your husband what I've asked you about?' Demetra felt confused. She was not sure anymore if she did the right thing to get involved into the conversation with that policeman and at the same time she didn't like the idea of Marcus being angry at her.

'Mr White asked me if I knew Joseph Dreher personally, about my kidnapping and if the two events are connected.' She slowly uttered looking down at the carpet.

'Who told you about kidnapping?' Marcus turned to Mr White.

'Our informant.'

'Well, in this case you go back to your informant and have him answer all your questions. Don't come here anymore. None of us will speak with you without our solicitor. Is that clear?'

'Thanks for your advice. See you soon. Good evening.' The inspector chose to ignore Marcus's rude words and, curtly nodding to them, left the flat. Marcus glanced into the corridor to see his tall figure moving in the direction of the stairs to his left. Then the strange cracking sound coming from the other side of the corridor caught his attention. Quickly, he turned to his right but the corridor was empty and all doors were closed. Silently cursing at everything and everyone, Marcus shut the door and locked it.

'I hope I'm still going to have some appetite for my dinner,' he said feeling of having enough of that city, that country and its laws.

* * *

'Mrs Vanderson, Chief Inspector White wants to see you.' Deborah's voice sounded cheerful on the phone. 'Do you want me to show him your office or you...?' She stopped. Demetra knew that Deborah regarded herself as being the personal secretary of Mel Sharon, although she was not. She was to serve all of them as well.

'Yes, please. I'll be waiting for you,' Demetra said not caring for Deborah's attitude towards her.

'See you.' Deborah hung up. Demetra speculated about inspector's unexpected visit. There must be some news about the death of Joseph Dreher, she thought. Someone knocked at the door.

'Come in,' she called out. The door opened at once.

'Chief Inspector White is here.' Deborah announced and stepped aside letting the man to pass her.

'See you,' she said and disappeared.

'Good day, Mrs Vanderson.' The officer stepped in and closed the door behind him. He glanced around: 'Your office is superb, spacious and comfortable. Congratulations!'

'I hope you didn't come here just to admire my office. What do you want now?' Demetra decided to be rude. He had some nerve to come here, she thought; anger boiled inside her at his bold intrusion. She didn't move from her chair, just looked at him di-

rectly with tightly pressed lips. An expression of disgust and arrogance could be easily read on her face.

The observant eyes of Inspector White didn't miss the change in her mood. But it didn't disturb him at all. He knew his job had to be done and any methods were good, as long as he could get to the result. He had spent the last twenty years of his life investigating homicide cases, and there were too many of those in London city. Each case was different from the other and the only common link between all of them was the murder itself. Each case was like a new Sudoku, with its new combination of numbers and new approach to its solution. Some cases could be compared to others, but not that one. It was entirely different from the place of murdering to the people connected with it. Looking now at Demetra, he was puzzled at life. She was just the type of person who could never have stepped aside the law, not speaking about committing crime. He sensed there was something amiss in that case but couldn't catch what and why. Nevertheless, he had to do his job, which meant to continue questioning her, as long as he could get into the core of the case, to get the right answers to his questions.

'I know Mr Vanderson didn't like my appearance at your flat. I thought it would have been more convenient to meet you in your office.' The inspector neared to her desk.

'I don't think so. I have nothing to tell you. Don't lose your time on me,' Demetra replied, automatically glancing at CCTV in the corner. Almost at once she realized it was a mistake. The inspector could presume she didn't want to speak there because of CCTV, but she might do in some other place.

'We could take a walk,' he offered, confirming her fears.

'You didn't understand me. I'm not going to speak with you at all. Not here, not anywhere. It's my final word. I have nothing to tell you about this case. I know nothing. That's all. Please leave me alone,' Demetra said and turned around in her armchair to face some file drawers on her left. She opened the first drawer and began to shift some files as looking for something. She didn't

look at the man. It took a few minutes to the inspector to realise that her words were final and she had closed their meeting for good.

'I'm leaving, Mrs Vanderson. But I'm promising you; I'm not going to give up on solving this case. You'll hear from me,' he stated firmly and turned on his heels. Only when she heard the door closing behind him she straightened herself in her armchair and looked into the ceiling, wondering on what the future had in store for her. She didn't need to wonder for long. The phone rang again. This time, it was her boss himself, inviting her to his office. When she entered it, Mel was at his desk.

'Please sit down,' he pointed to the chair in front of his table.

'Thanks.' She took it, holding her hands clapped on her lap. She quickly summed up all her latest assignments; she was sure that there were no errors in her calculations.

Glancing at him, she noticed his appearance was less immaculate then customary. His expensive suit and his diamond pin held his tie patterned by Munch's "Scream" as usual, but his posture and face expression were of a tired, old man who was carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders and had no way to get rid of it.

For the first time she saw him hesitating and he seemed lost. He silently studied her giving her the impression of being apprehensive or scared. The thought came to her that he had decided to lay her off. To lose the job would have been the worst of her nightmares. She hesitantly smiled at him.

After a long silence, he moved in his chair and looked directly at her. Taking a deep breath he said: 'I've heard you've had an unpleasant incident. Everybody talks about it. You have found a murdered man in your flat. It was our employee, Joseph Dreher, as I understood. I'm so sorry for you. Please take my sincere regrets for your terrible ordeal,' he smiled to her, inviting for revelations. She didn't reply.

'I didn't think you knew that man well, did you?' he probed.

'No, I didn't. I saw him a few times in the building.'

'Do you have any idea why and how he was found inside your flat?'

'I have no idea at all. Unless he wanted to rob me. But I don't have any valuables that can be of interest to somebody.'

'He has worked for me for over fifteen years. Good, honest, loyal man. He had no criminal mind, I know it for sure.' Mel shifted uneasily in his chair: 'Strange, he knew your address and even the flat number.'

'It's not strange at all. With the privacy act an obedient citizen cannot get any information on anyone. But with a few pounds bribe one can get what one wants,' Demetra hotly contradicted. Then she added: 'He could just have walked to our personnel department and get my file; there is all the information about me. Do you agree?' Mel didn't reply.

He looked at her with a blank expression. She wondered what had happened to him and why. I wish Marcus could be here to see Mel's face and to figure out what is wrong, she thought. Suddenly she felt like rising from her seat and run away, far away without glancing back.

'If you don't mind, I would like to return to my office.'

'I thought you were having conversation with the police inspector, weren't you?' Mel stated, quite unexpectedly.

'I was not. Well, he entered my office forcibly, using Deborah to bring him in. I've refused to speak to him. There is nothing to talk about. He left the room almost at once. Soon after that, I got your call,' Demetra explained.

Mel kept silent. He knew there was nothing more to get from her than he had already got. She was ignorant of the motives and moves of Joseph Dreher, he was sure of it. Although, on the back of his head he had the nagging feeling that Demetra knew much more than she wanted to say.

Since Mel had not been informed about her kidnapping, for him Demetra was just someone who came from Karsland, which he visited not so long ago. His cousin, Albert Issel, asked him to

give her the job and he did. He preferred to be ignorant of anything which concerned her. He hated to get involved with anything that had nothing to do with his work. '*The less one knows, the less trouble one gets*,' was the motto he faithfully stuck to.

But yesterday's late visit of Bert Blank to his home disrupted Mel's quiet life making him to forfeit his motto. Bert was his cousin from his father's side, meaning he had to obey him as a superior relative, not forgetting of Bert being the boss of the family's secret business.

Bert ordered him to question Demetra, trying to find out what she knew about Joseph Dreher and her connection with him. Bert was *adamant* about it. Mel tried to contradict his cousin explaining his unwillingness to face Demetra. Bert didn't want to hear any arguments. His order is the law and Mel had to do as he was told.

Looking into Demetra's pale thin face he felt guilty for disturbing her. He was very uncomfortable with himself for all the words he was forced to say.

'This awful business disrupted our normal life in the office. Everybody is agitated; our work stopped in the middle, police is moving in and out, continuous telephone calls. I have a headache from all these things. Nobody understands anything and you, of all people, who are involved, know nothing.' He stopped taking a deep breath, and then he continued: 'You are right. There is no way to know why that man was in your flat. You said you were out, is it true?'He paused for a moment as waiting for Demetra to contradict him. She did not.

'I hate to speak to you about it, but you are the prime suspect, don't you know that?' His face began to redden. She saw him frantic and distressed. She understood him well but what could she do with all that trouble. She could not help him. She was bewildered herself by the death of Joseph Dreher, who was ready to help her.

'Sorry, but I need to go. I cannot help you. I am feeling ill. I need to take my medication.' She rose from her seat.

'Of course. It was stupid of me to keep you here for so long. I forgot that you were not so well recently.' To her surprise, he stood up, went around the desk and reached for her. Taking her by the hand, he walked with her to the door.

'We will continue this conversation some other time. Go, take care of you,' he said, leaving her at the entrance.

Chapter 39

She entered the flat, dropped her bag on the nearest chair. A horrible smell was in the air, stinking of sweat, dirty, unwashed clothes.

What a stench! Where did it come from? She glanced at the French door. It was closed. Well, it must be my imagination, with that thought; she went to the bedroom to change her clothes.

She put her dressing gown on; tight its belt and her hand went automatically to the left pocket to get her wrist holder. It was not there. She found it in the right pocket. She could bet she never put it there, since the right one was reserved for her handkerchief. Her forehead covered with perspiration, cold sweat ran down her back, subconsciously she knew someone was in the bedroom looking for something.

What did they look for? Who are those people that wouldn't let them live in peace there? Why not let it be? Why could they not pretend that *papers* never existed? What were they afraid of? Anyway, who were they?

Demetra suddenly became frustrated and angry, feeling hopeless in face of an anonymous enemy. Furiously, she plonked on her bed and frantically looked around as checking for someone who may be hidden somewhere in the room. It was a pointless gesture. There was no way to hide in that tiny room, which she hated with all her heart. How she missed her grand bedroom with its elegant furnishings and splendid view on her garden! Demetra swallowed hardly to prevent crying out of desperation. She gasped for air. She slowly forced herself to calm down, deeply inhaling and slowly exhaling.

After a while, she laid down stretching her arms along the length of her body and looking up to the ceiling. She tried to think of nothing. The best way to relax or to fall asleep is to count num-

bers, she was told at the nursery school. Remembering it, she did exactly that. She dozed off eventually.

When Marcus returned home he found her slumbered on top of the bed. She was often exhausted after a full day of work, he thought, but not to such extent as to fall asleep. Even if she was fatigued, she would still prepare something to eat. I wonder what's happened today, that she could not wait for my return, he thought, quickly taking off his overcoat. He decided to wait until she woke up but almost at once he heard her calling him by name. Entering the bedroom, he found her sitting on the bed.

'Sorry, my darling. I fell asleep. Don't know why. I had a very bad day,' she smiled hiding her gloomy mood: 'I'll fix something for us to bite. You're not so late, are you?'

'It's seven o'clock. The whole evening is in front of us,' he cheered her up, 'I'll help you, if you want.' Without delay, Demetra left the bed and went to the kitchen, leaving Marcus to change his clothes.

As he was unloosing his tie, he caught the strange smell in the room. What did she do here? He wondered the same as Demetra did earlier.

'What is the smell in our bedroom?' he asked her. At the same time, he caught the same smell in the sitting room.

'Demetra, did you burn something? I've sensed some strange smell.'

'I'll tell you later,' she replied from the kitchen. When she began to cook, the food odour suppressed the horrible smell.

'You know that somebody entered our flat again. That smell, which you felt, was a stench of somebody's dirty clothes and unwashed body. If someone wanted to search our flat, at least someone would have been clean and we wouldn't know about it. If not for finding my wrist holder in the wrong pocket I could never guessed someone being in our flat. This is how I knew there was somebody here.' Demetra signed to Marcus. They didn't dare to speak; sign language became their routine in the flat.

'I know who did it,' he signed, looking directly into her eyes.

'Who?' An incredible expression covered her face.

'If you think a little harder, you'll know who this person is.'

'Oh, no. I cannot figure it out. You're better than me on such things. Tell me who this is?'

'Not today. Tomorrow.' He hugged her closer. They were sitting on the sofa after dinner with the TV on, as loud as it was acceptable for not disturbing the neighbours. They preferred to give the impression of being a carefree couple. Just in case somebody wanted to listen near the door. It's not like they could hear anything, signed language was the best habit they had brought with them from Karsland.

Demetra told him about the Inspector White's visit to her office and Mel's questioning of her.

'I guess I disappointed both of them. How can I know who killed that poor man and why. Somebody did it and we know why,' she signed to him reminding about the big brown envelope. She had not seen it around anymore. She looked directly into his eyes silently asking what was in that envelope. She was sure he looked through it and knew why Dreher paid with his life to bring it to them.

Marcus hesitated for a moment, and then he decided the time had come to tell her the truth. Both of them were in danger, and Demetra had the right to know why.

Sign language is much slower than speech. It took Marcus over an hour to tell her about the Spider Group, Bert Blank, Albert Issel, Mel Sharon and all that was connected with them. To hear that Karsland was just a huge warehouse for keeping stolen spoils was too much for Demetra.

'I cannot live here anymore. No, I cannot. I must run away. We must go away till we are still alive. These people are dangerous. They are just sophisticated criminals, violent monsters, for them human life has none or very little value. Any methods are good for them.' To Marcus's enormous surprise, Demetra got hyster-

ical. She was now shouting in full voice, seeming to forget about her whereabouts. In desperation, Marcus pulled her face to his chest in the attempt to suppress her cries.

'I wish you could take some of your medicine to calm you down. Someone could hear you,' Marcus whispered into her ear. He lifted her head by the chin. Her face was distorted by panic, her eyes were closed. She just moaned continuously: 'I want to go away.'

He saw there was no way to get her to her senses. It was clear her nerve system was not able to handle the stress of the recent events. He hugged her with all his strength to muffle her sobs, lamentations and fits. He decided to embrace her until she calmed down. From the past experience, he knew it could take a lot of time but he had no other choice.

Little by little, her sobs changed to uneven gasps, she stopped her attempts to free from him. Then he caught her even breathing; she was then quiet. He realised that she had slumbered. He slowly shifted himself making her to lie down on the sofa. He moved her to a more comfortable position. Taking seat on the chair, he looked at her for a long time. He knew she was right about running away. He wanted it, too. But how could they do it if each of their step and move was registered and watched?

The killing of Joseph Dreher was the worst luck which they could get there. It was clear that until the murderer will be found they would have been treated as possible participators of the crime. Marcus knew it better than Demetra. They could never be able to leave that country as long as the assassin of Dreher wasn't apprehended.

He had his suspicions about the murderer. He was almost sure on who it was. He had a small plan for the day after, when Demetra would be off to her office. But after her outburst, he was not sure she would be able to leave the flat for her work. On impulse, he decided to do it then.

It was ten o'clock. Quite late, but he couldn't wait any longer. If

they continued to stay in London, he was afraid for Demetra, who was getting too ill. That day was the best example that she had reached the point of no return. He made up his mind.

From the beginning Marcus thought the killer had to be someone who could easily control in and out from their flat, be friendly, easy going and above any suspicions. The only person who fitted such description was Lady Onslowe. It was true she was a frail, old lady on the outside but her eyes were bright and watchful, and her appearance was shabby – her old clothes in need of washing. Marcus thought who ever shoot the man down didn't need any physical strength, just to have the courage to pull a trigger.

She was the only one who could easily tamper with CCTV, get a spare key from the condominium key box, and enter their flat without anyone paying attention to it. He decided to confront that lady immediately.

* * *

Marcus went to the bedroom and dressed up as for going out. He opened the entrance door and stepped into the corridor. Without rush, he locked the door and humming under his nose moved to the stairs. He knew Lady Onslowe will be watching him. And he was not wrong.

When he was passing her door, it was slightly jammed. Quickly, Marcus pushed it and entered the flat. The sound of something heavy knocking down confirmed his thoughts about being watched by the old lady. He swiftly closed the door and turned to face the furious distorted face of Lady Onslowe.

'What's the meaning of this? What do you want? Leave my flat at once,' she arrogantly uttered. Marcus just stared at her. The horrible smell of dirt and old sweat was coming from her. He was silent fighting the instant nausea he felt.

'I told you to leave at once. I'll call the police.'

'I don't think it is in your interest,' he said, recovering his whereabouts.

'What do you mean?'

'Who are you? Why are you watching each of my moves? Who do you work for?'

'I've lived here for over thirty years. I bought this flat with my hard-earned money. I am retired now and free to act as I want,' she replied.

'And what was your job? How did you manage to acquire such an expensive flat on your meagre salary? Or maybe not so meagre at all?

'It's none of your business. Leave my flat.'

'Only after you told me who killed that man in my flat. Since you are watching everything and everyone, I am sure, all day long, you saw somebody entering my flat and his killer as well,' Marcus insisted.

'I was out shopping,' she laughed to his face.

'You killed that poor man, I know it.' Marcus stepped forward to reach her.

The next moment Lady Onslowe retrieved the gun from her pocket and pointed it at Marcus. 'Of course, you'd be the one who could find out about me,' said Lady Onslowe in a low ugly voice. Her usually sweet smile disappeared, replaced by hate.

'Don't move or I'll kill you,' she warned him, stepping back.

'You'll be caught at once. When they find my body in your flat, it will be clear you're the one who killed me. Don't make a fool of yourself thinking you can escape,' Marcus said in calm voice. 'Give me the gun and I'll let you go. Just tell me, why did you kill poor Joseph,' Marcus stepped closer to her.

'Don't move. I am serious. I'll kill you if you move. Let me take my bag and leave this flat.' Without taking her eyes off of Marcus, she picked her bag with the other hand.

'Move from the door. To the right,' she commanded to him. Marcus obeyed, calculating his next step.

With her gun still pointed at him, the old lady slowly moved until her back touched the door. With her left hand, she tried to reach for the handle. Marcus decided it was the right moment for

him. He launched his attack. He grabbed her hand holding the gun and pushed it up to the ceiling. The loud sound of explosion startled both of them. He hit her right hand with all his strength and the gun fell down on the floor.

'I think you're getting old for such kind of job. You should fight me better than this,' he mocked at her, twisting her arm behind her back and forcing her to her knees.

Then he pulled her to the window. Holding her with his right hand, he snatched the curtain tie and bound with it both her hands. In that moment someone banged on the door. Leaving her where she was, Marcus went to opened it and saw the big black porter in front of him.

'Are you alright?' The man was short of breath. 'I was afraid I was too late.'

'He tried to kill me,' Lady Onslowe suddenly screamed, 'it is his gun. I've never had a gun in my life. I want my lawyer. I know my rights. Free my hands immediately.' She was herself again - haughty, straight and well-spoken - the picture of aristocratic arrogance. 'It's not the end of me. You'll hear from me. You, Vanderson, watch yourself. We'll find you anywhere.'

'Shut up, old witch. At last you'll be where you belong.'

'Why did you think it was in her flat?' Marcus turned to the porter.

'I've watched her for some time,' his answer was short, 'did you call the inspector already?'

'Not yet. You call him. I must return to my flat. My wife is there left alone,' Marcus said and left in a hurry.

* * *

As he guessed, Demetra was still on the sofa, but her eyes were wide opened and she was trembling. She didn't move at his entrance, nor showed that she was aware of him. Seeing her white mask-like face, he knew she was ill again. He cursed Karsland and its rulers for ruining her health, maybe forever.

'Demetra, my love, can you hear me?' He whispered into her

ear: 'You have nothing to be afraid of. Lady Onslowe killed Dreher. She's in custody.' Demetra didn't respond at all.

Marcus began to worry. He remembered well when she was brought home from detention: on a wheelchair, blank face, no memory; the following months of her slow recovery and returning to normal, almost normal state. He hoped all those advanced medication could sweep away her illness. But it seems not so. He didn't panic yet, but he was on the edge of getting crazy himself. *Oh, no. I won't give them satisfaction of being driven to collapse. I am strong enough for both of us and I'll do everything that it'll be required to make our life free of fear and anxiety,* Marcus thought.

'Demetra, tell me that you hear me. Please respond in some way, let me know you can hear what I am saying to you,' he repeated, looking into her face.

After a while, he noticed the slight movement of her eyelids, and then her eyes closed and opened again. This time she looked at him and he saw she recognised him. The mask slipped from her face and was replaced by some kind of smile.

'Are you with me now?' he knew it was a stupid question, but he didn't find a better one.

'Yes,' she murmured so low he could hardly hear her at all.

'You gave me a fright. I thought I'd lost you again.' He went to the sofa and sat on its edge. He slightly bent, placing his arm around her body and his face close to hers. He didn't feel like speaking, just to stay near her and know she was herself again.

'Is it true she killed him?' He hardly heard her weak whisper.

'Yes, it is true. Ah, you are a naughty girl; you heard me and made me anxious about your health. I almost got crazy out of worrying that you were ill again. I never forget that ill-fated Karsland with its inhuman laws, brutal prisons and vicious ideas.' Marcus gently kissed her on her lips.

'I'll try to be calm. But I want to be out of this country. Let us get out from here. I don't think the rest of Europe will be simi-

lar to England. In the end, it's just a small island. As all islands it cannot be compared with the main land. The local population has no means to compare the size of their territory with the rest of Europe and due to that they are getting a sense of superiority. They regard themselves as being more important than the rest of the world. Only when someone had visited the main land, one realises their island is just a small country in comparison with Europe but they cannot openly say it. Everyone who travelled abroad is rich and with some standing on the island. One cannot say the truth about the size and misery of the island unless one wants to lose his or her status. This is why for centuries England managed to create the image of importance and riches. With time, all of that disappeared leaving the real England: poor, multiracial and undereducated, without local customs and traditions.' Demetra stopped, taking a breath.

'Well, well, if you can talk so much, you are well already,' he laughed, 'I promise you, we'll get out from this country. I don't know when or how, but we'll be out.'

'I'll be patiently waiting for that day to come. Please do…' the loud sound of the door bell interrupted her. Marcus got up from the sofa.

'Do not panic. It must be the police. They want to ask me some questions about Lady Onslowe. I guess you'll be better in the other room,' Marcus said, helping her to stand and walking with her to the bedroom. Placing her on bed comfortably, he lightly squeezed her hand. 'I'll be back soon,' he whispered and left the room.

* * *

'Come in, take a seat,' Marcus offered to Chief Inspector White, who stood facing him in person. The wide, friendly smile on the inspector's face was the best present which Marcus got in a long time.

'I knew there was something fishy about this case, but who would have thought that old respectable, aristocratic lady could be the cold killer. Well, I've had similar cases in the past. There is

nothing new for aristocracy to commit a crime, but at her age...,' the inspector stopped. He seated himself on a nearby chair and looked at Marcus who took his place on the sofa.

'Well, let's be quick. Tell me what's happened there.' He unbuttoned his overcoat and leaned on the back of the chair, preparing to listen.

Without rush, Marcus began his story. He told how he suspected Lady Onslowe since the day she showed so much interest in his wife. He thought it was strange for English aristocracy to ask so many questions and have a 'be forward' attitude.

When Joseph Dreher was shot and no gun was left behind, Marcus thought it was quite a strange thing. In most cases the killer leaves the gun on the crime scene. Marcus decided whoever killed the man had to be a professional. Also, this person had to have an easy entrance to the building and watching their flat. Without those advantages, the killer would have never been able to catch Dreher when he entered the flat and murder him there. Who could that person be? Lady Onslowe had all those requirements. She was above suspicions, the old lady, well-educated, well-mannered, switched on. Her only defect was that she didn't keep her clothes clean. The smell of dirty clothing which she left in their flat, told Marcus that he had to question the old lady about Dreher.

The moment Marcus introduced himself in her flat; she saw that he knew she was the one who murdered Dreher. Instead of trying to proof him wrong, she pointed the gun at him. He easily disarmed her. She was too old for such job, he concluded.

Marcus turned his head and met Chief Inspector's eyes. First time in all those months of living in that dreadful city, Marcus glimpsed a touch of human understanding there. Maybe I was wrong thinking there were no worthy people left, he thought.

'I want to speak with you,' Marcus slowly said, keeping eye contact with the man. 'Wait a moment please.' He quickly stood up and went to the bedroom.

'Is he still there?' asked Demetra. She lay on top of the bed: 'I need your help. Could you tell him to go away?'

'He'll be out soon,' Marcus replied, opening his wardrobe.

'Why did you open it?' Demetra looked at his doings.

'I need to take something.'

'What?'

'Nothing special.' He pulled out the brown envelope trying to hide it from her.

'Oh, no,' she saw his trick and stopped him at once, 'you cannot give it to him. He'll betray us. You forgot he is a loyal servant of the Kingdom.'

'I'll explain you everything later. Don't worry! Everything will be alright.' He bent to kiss her: 'Don't try to stand up. I'll be back in a few minutes. I promise you.'

She was silent, but her displeasure was clearly written on her face.

'It's all here. I guess I can trust you.' Marcus handed the brown envelope to the inspector. 'We have nobody in this country, as you know well. We chose to emigrate instead of becoming Barbò.' At the surprise written on the officer's face, Marcus explained the difference of status in Karsland.

'Are you kidding me? I've never heard such incredible tale.'

'For you it is a tale, but for us it is real life. My wife was tortured with the most sophisticated drugs. She was released out of prison only because they thought she would be paralysed for the rest of her life. They didn't want to bother themselves with invalids. To my big luck she recovered enough to be able to lead a normal life, almost normal.'

'I guess for the both of you, the life here was not so easy considering your previous one. Especially, with all this business of finding the murdered man in your flat. It must be horrible for your wife. Not to mention other events that you have recently had.' The inspector lifted his eyebrows.

'I guess it's better not to speak about it. My wife is in the other

room. I don't want her to get agitated about her London's experiences.'

'I thought so.'

'My wife wishes to leave this country. I promised her to do everything to make her wish come true. Could you please contact your superintendent to help us to go away soon?' Marcus said, looking intently into the man's eyes.

'I'll inform my superiors about your intentions. I'll contact you as soon as I have some news for you.' The chief inspector sounded formal, but his face told Marcus that he would do everything in his power to get them out from there. All they had to do was to wait.

'Thanks.' Marcus got up from the sofa. The man rose from his chair, too.

'I'll look into this matter,' said the inspector, slightly shaking the brown envelope in his hand. 'I know you've decided to trust me. You are right. I'll do what I can to get you out of here,' he repeated, putting the envelope into the internal pocket of his overcoat.

'Don't worry I won't lose it,' he laughed, catching the worried expression on Marcus face.

'I don't. I just know you are holding in your hands our freedom or our death.'

'Let's not be dramatic.'

'When you'll get acquainted with it, you'll know why I've said it.'

'I'll call you.' He turned to the hall. As soon as Marcus closed the door behind the man and locked it, he went to Demetra.

At his entrance, she turned to face him. She didn't utter a word, but her question was clearly written on her face.

'Yes, I gave it to him. He is our only chance to survive in this country,' Marcus answered her silent question in sign language. 'I agree with you, he is a loyal servant of the Kingdom but he's the only person with whom we were able to establish a normal human contact. Can't you see this city is full of hypocrites, ca-

reerists, swindlers and who knows what. I've promised you I'll get you out of London. I'll do it. Let me do what I think is right. I feel I can trust him.'

'Alright, I'll leave it with you,' she signed. 'I'll try to be patient and wait, but inside me I am so upset and angry, and fed up with the surroundings that I can hardly control myself. Your revelations killed the last hope of settling here. I want to run away today, now, this moment. Don't judge me harshly! I guess I overestimated my physical and mental strength. I've realized I have been brought up and lived all my life cocooned from the real world with its problems and hardships for survival. I thought my life of work was a difficult one but I didn't know what it was like to have financial problems and be unsecure about the next day. I've seen enough of London's life.' Demetra stopped her signing and loud sobs filled the room. She wept noisily, tears ran down her cheeks, dropping from her chin and staining her clothes. She seemed not to notice it.

Marcus was taken aback by her misery, but he could not find the right words to comfort her. Both of them brought up by Karsland's standards: Stakhanò must be strong and composed under any circumstances; Stakhanò must never show ones real feelings and especially the weakness, which is regarded as the worst of all. Spartan bringing up didn't teach them to comfort somebody in desperate situations. Seeing Demetra so much distressed, he felt he had to do something but what? He reached the bed and bending to her, he took her hand. She angrily pulled it away.

'Don't touch me. I need real help, not just holding my hand and tell me everything will be well. In these few months of our life in this goddamned country, I was kidnapped, almost blown up by a bomb, accused of murder. Don't you think it is enough for one person? I know I am Stakhanò and I must never forget it. But I am a weak woman too, who was tortured with the powerful drugs. I am lucky to have recovered, but not lucky enough to live a quiet family life with my husband and hope to get some children.'

'I'll do everything in my power to get you out from here,' Marcus uttered, looking into her tear-stained face. He tried to catch her eyes, but she stubbornly looked down.

He bent and kissed her on the cheek as to say, let's forget about the past.

She lifted her eyes and met his. For some seconds, they just looked at each other in silence. Then Demetra lifted the corner of their expensive bedspread and dried her face with it. Seeing her gesture, Marcus laughed from his heart.

'I know it's awful to use the bedcover instead of a handkerchief, but I don't care about anymore.' Demetra smiled at him.

'Good girl! I think I still have that Italian sparkling wine, if I am not wrong it is Martini *spumante*, which you liked so much.' At her confirmative nod Marcus stood up. 'Let's drink to our new start.' He pulled her from the bed. She didn't resist letting him to lead her to the sitting room.

'I can walk by myself.' She freed herself from his arms and went to the sofa to take her usual place closer to the kitchen.

'I'll get the drinks,' he offered.

'No, it's not there,' she called out to him, hearing the opening of shelves in the kitchen. 'I've moved all the spirits here, in the cabinet under the TV.'

'You're right. I forgot about your new arrangement.'

When drinks were served and both of them were cosily resting on the sofa Demetra asked him a strange question: 'Do you feel sorry about leaving Karsland with a wife like me?'

'What do you mean?' Marcus sounded stunned. 'Why do you ask such thing?'

'I guess anyone can feel tired of being a nurse to an invalid who cannot walk or needs to be protected from any stress to prevent her from having a nervous breakdown,' Demetra explained.

'Well, it seems like we are entering into dangerous waters. You know well, I married you because I love you. You are mine. I'll do everything to make you happy. That includes taking care of you,

to be your nurse if needed. But I am sure, with time, you'll recover from this condition. I'll pray to all your antique Russian Saints and I am sure they will hear me. Did you understand what I've just said? I'll find a way to get you well. I promise to you and to myself.' He moved closer and hugged her tightly.

'Soon I won't have my medicine anymore. We cannot get it here. Don't you see this country was left two centuries behind? You see it every day. The way they live here, their interests, ideas, crime, porno and so on. We must run away, before we become as they are,' Demetra whispered into his ear.

'I promise you I'll find a way to get out from this country. Let's be patient. I am sure Inspector White will help us, especially now that we are no longer under suspicion of crime.'

'How do you know they will drop all charges? It is true Lady Onslowe got caught, but what if she has someone important to protect her? We should wait and see how things will be before being sure about our stance,' Demetra wondered.

'I guess it is enough for today.' Marcus abruptly stopped her. 'Tell me, what do you want for dinner and I'll prepare it. We still have to celebrate the end of the Dreher's case and drink to our better future.' Marcus pulled her even closer to him, and they sat in silence for a long time, each one immersed in their thoughts.

* * *

In two days time, Marcus sat in the office of Chief Inspector White facing his stony countenance. A few minutes had passed since he had entered there but the inspector didn't utter a word yet, just sat there and blankly looked at him. The silence in the room was so tense that it made Marcus to wonder what would happen next.

The office was a quite big cubicle, separated from the rest by glass panels; through these Marcus could see the desks of the others. There was no privacy in the chief inspector's office, but maybe it was for the best, he thought.

'Well, I wanted to ask you a few questions concerning Lady On-

slowe,' the inspector said at last, but Marcus clearly read on his face it was just a pretext. 'I would like to hear again about everything which is connected with her during all the time you've lived next to her.'

'All that I knew about her, I've already told you. There is nothing I can add to my story,' Marcus calmly replied; only the tense face and the deep lines on both sides of his mouth were showing his agitated state.

'How is Mrs Vanderson? I hope she recovered from all these unpleasantness,' the officer changed the subject at once.

'You may call those so, but my wife is a very ill person; and instead of recovering in the quietness of the old civilisation she got kidnapped, almost blown up, accused of murder and got under continuous stress. You may not know about that but she was born and brought up in a country where none of these things, which are normal for old Europe, could happen. Hers was a quiet, correct and happy life,' Marcus said.

'In that case, may I ask you why you left such paradise for this hell?' The inspector lifted his eyebrows to accentuate his question. Marcus kept quiet. He couldn't explain in a few words why they have left Karsland and he wasn't sure if it was needed.

'We dropped all charges against your wife. Her lawyer will get the papers in a few days and she is free to continue on with her life.'

'My wife is desperate about her safety. She is afraid of stepping out from the house. Her nerve system is at its limit. She wants to leave this country and go anywhere, as far as possible from here. Could you please find out if there are possibilities for us to move out? This is all that I'm asking you. I hope you got all the needed proofs and that they can speed up our departure.' Marcus looked directly into inspector's face.

'I can assure you, she has nothing to be afraid of anymore. Everything is taken care of. Everyone who was involved in that particular business will be prosecuted and punished according to

the British law. You can be sure of that. I cannot say more. My department is homicide and I can only speak about things concerning it. The other things, as you know well, are not my responsibility and I cannot say how they will be handled. We all hope the result will be positive for us as well as for you.' The man stopped inhaling deeply and then added: 'I am sorry for your wife. Please tell her I'll do what I can to speed up your case.'

'Thanks. It will be appreciated.' Marcus replied, wondering how long it could take before they will be out of that country.

* * *

Then one late evening, just ten days after Marcus' visit to Chief Inspector White, someone rang their bell. Since there was no announcement from the porter, Marcus knew it had to be something special. And it was special.

Several uniformed men entered their flat. One of them gave Marcus an envelope. Quickly opening it, there was a short letter enclosed from the Foreign Ministry stating that Marcus and Demetra Vanderson were declared persona non grata and must leave the country immediately.

'What is the meaning of this letter? What does immediately mean?' Marcus looked into the eyes of the letter bearer.

'Don't worry. We have an order to pack all your things, and then bring you to the airport and then you'll be transported by plane to another country. Please give me your passports.' The officer stretched his hand waiting for documents.

His words shocked Marcus, whose brain could not yet accept the meaning of what was going on. Who are they? Maybe they were Spider people, pretending to be British Immigration Office staff?

'How could I know that you are representing the Foreign Office? Show me your credentials!' He demanded at last, recovering from his shock.

'Just a moment!' The officer called someone to the room. The tall man in long leather overcoat entered the room and Marcus

recognised him at once as the one who have brought them to that flat.

'As I can see, you don't need any introduction. You're brought here by him.' The officer pointed in the direction of the man.

'Good evening, Mr Vanderson. Nice to see you again.' The man smiled, making Marcus feel as an errant schoolboy.

Without a reply, he turned around and went to the bedroom to wake Demetra up, who was already in bed. At the news, she jumped from the bed as she had never done for so many days.

'I cannot belief it is true. Are you sure they said in a few hours we'll be out of here? I'm as happy as I've never been. Don't worry. I'll be ready in no time.' She began to collect her things without delay.

PART THREE

Return home

Chapter 40

'And now? What will we do?' Demetra sat on the chair placed in the middle of the big room filled with their luggage. Her face reflected her desperation and the loss of all her hopes, which she had on their departure from London. 'And now?' She repeated her question, knowing there was no answer to it.

They had arrived to Florence in the early morning and were immediately brought to the only five-star hotel in the city centre. Their luggage was carried up for them to the best suite, as they were told. This time they kept their British passports and were left along with these last instructions: do not trust anyone, do not leave the luggage unattended, do not order meals to be brought up to the suite, do not walk alone, if you pay, do not show the money in your purse, do not speak to strangers and etc. if they wanted to survive in *Bella Italia*. In any case, they had to settle there, there was no way to go back to London, thought Demetra.

'And how could somebody start a new life in a country where one cannot move a finger without wondering what would happen next?' She glanced around the room again.

The sitting room was furnished with expensive wooden furniture covered with innumerate scratches and writings. The heavy damask draperies were stained, dusty and smelled of tobacco. The floor was covered with an oriental carpet, which lost its original colour and was stained in several places. The elegant baroque chair, on which she sat, was unstable, giving the impression it would not hold her for long.

'If this is the best, I wonder what the worst is,' she said loudly.

'What are you talking about, by yourself?' Marcus entered the room. 'This must be one of the oldest palaces converted into a hotel. Look at the height of the ceiling and its decorations. I love

those *putties* and look at that blue sky. Look at these corners with elaborated frescoes. I've always admired Italian architecture and art.'

'I am glad at least one of us is comfortable in this grubby setting,' Demetra replied, pursing her lips. 'Don't you see what's around you? Look at this carpet, curtains, furniture. How can we stay here? I cannot!' She rose from her seat and walked between the suitcases and various bags. 'I would like some tea but how can I have it if we are advised not to order anything in the suite and I cannot go alone to the lodge. Well, you speak Italian fluently. I don't. Tell me how can I live here?' Her eyes filled with tears but she quickly went to the window in attempt to hide them.

'I don't mind having some tea, too. Let me go and see if we can get some. You just wait here. Don't get desperate. We'll discuss our next step over tea. Cheer up.' Marcus smiled and then added: 'I'll be back soon.' He left.

The wide long corridor was empty. Such complete silence surrounded him that it made it difficult to believe that they were in a hotel. It even didn't look as one. The stone walls were covered with old tapestries so threadbare it was hard to figure out its original images or colours. The stones of the floor were so uneven, worn out with time, that walking was not easy, if not dangerous. It needed a good washing too. 'It is mystery how this place could get a five-star ratings,' Marcus mused, descending the stone steps.

He had reached the ground floor, a huge area with vaulted ceiling and flagged floor, decorated with several huge oil paintings depicting medieval sceneries. On one side was a reception area to which he directed. A uniformed black man was behind the desk.

'I wonder if I could get some refreshments. Tea?' Marcus briskly asked.

'Of course. That way is the Breakfast Hall.' The black man's welcoming smile and well-spoken, mother-tongue Italian language, identified him as a receptionist.

'Thanks.' Marcus turned to his left and went through a short corridor to enter the vast space filled with tables, covered with white tablecloths and chairs arranged around each of them. Chairs were covered with white covers touching the floor. Marcus could see tables lined on one wall. It looked as a buffet, prepared for breakfast. On the farther side of the hall there were two waiters; at the sight of Marcus, one of them began to move in his direction. He was a middle-aged man, tall, lean, with a sad face and correct manners typical of the ingenious *Toscano*. Reaching Marcus, the man stopped and with a welcoming smile said: 'May I help you?'

'Oh, yes. I would like to have some tea for two.'

'Here or in your suite?

'How do you know I am staying in a suite?' Marcus eyebrows went up.

'I don't, but judging by your looks you could never stay in any of the other rooms in this hotel. This place was not renovated for over a hundred years and as for the cleaning, we cannot find someone professional willing to do this kind of job.'

'You are telling me in this country everyone is so well-off that you can't find cleaners? How do Italians keep their houses clean, if there are no people doing manual work?'

'It's not my place to look into such matter.' He quickly glanced around and, noticing the other man nearing them, he abruptly changed the subject: 'Do you like your tea here or shall I bring it to your suite?'

'I'll wait until you prepare it and we'll go up together. Let me choose some sandwiches, cookies and fruits.' Marcus went to the table near the wall, which he spotted at his entrance.

When he filled a few plates with various delicious-looking pastries and some fresh fruits, he turned to check on the tea.

'Your tea is ready.' Marcus saw a huge tray with a tea kettle, cups and etc held by the old man.

'I want those, too.' Marcus pointed to the plates filled by him.

'Mirko, come, I need your help.' *Toscano* called the second man who was a young, short, dark-skinned boy with a mass of curly hair.

'Yes, sir.'

'Help me to carry these.' He pointed in direction of Marcus' choice. Then he turned to Marcus: 'Sir, you go first. We'll follow you.'

Opening the door wide and letting both men in, Marcus called: 'Tea is here.' The room was empty.

'Demetra, where are you? Come quickly, breakfast is ready.' Marcus called her again, and turning to the waiters, he said: 'Put the trays on that table. You can leave now. I'll call you later.' Giving the old man a tip and waiving them away, he closed the door.

Marcus quickly went to the bedroom finding Demetra sitting in the armchair and at his entrance she lifted her head and looked at him. He noticed her absent expression and wondered if she was alright.

'I was waiting for you,' she smiled, making Marcus exhale in relief. 'Thank God, she's well,' he thought and said out loud: 'Tea is getting cold. Let's have some breakfast.'

'I'm ready,' she replied, rising from the seat.

The meal was consumed in silence. Marcus wondered at her being so quiet; she usually commented on the food, but today…

'I know you're not happy at the present situation but let us see if we can do something about changing it to the better. You know I've lived here, in Florence, for a few years and I found it beautiful and comfortable. I'm sure you'll love it when you'll get to know it well,' he began.

'You're here on vacation. It's different from being permanently living in the country. I don't speak any Italian or French. It means I cannot get any job. Anyway what kind of job can I get here? Saleswoman? Waitress? In Florence there are no industries or anything connected to high technology. That means, for me to work we must move to the North of Italy, to some industrial

centre. Are you ready for that? To live in an overcrowded area, small outdated apartment, long waiting queues for any shopping, including pharmacy; bad smell, dirt and garbage on the streets. Why do you think I chose London? It used to be the most acceptable place for living, gracious living.

I don't know if Florence can be on the same level, but I don't need to tell you all these things: just look at this five-star hotel. It tells you everything. I won't even mention about the possibility of the Spider Group finding us. How can we be sure that there will not be someone looking for me? How can I have the guarantee of my security?' She stopped, turning her face from him and looking at the painting hanged on the wall.

'You cannot be so pessimistic. We were told that there will be no danger from those people. We must believe them. I'm sure we can settle here well. Italians are hospitable people who continue to take in everyone from abroad. All of them are treated very well. It means we'll be treated well, too. Anyway, let's wait and see how things will go on.' Marcus tried to comfort her, but inside his heart he knew the situation was hopeless. He couldn't reach her anymore.

Seeing her face absent and with lack of interest, he thought he had to find some other way to settle them. He couldn't forget that she still was recovering from her prison ordeal and needs special medication, which could be found in Karsland only. He knew his position was difficult and no one could help him, except himself. Unless… He shook his head as to get rid of some thought which entered his brain.

'I'll find a solution to our problems, Demetra. Don't get desperate!' He stood up and went closer to her. Taking her hand and pulling her up, he put his arms around her and hugged her tightly, without saying a word. Demetra rested her head against his shoulder and he felt her tears on his neck.

'It will be alright, I promise you. I love you and I will take care of you, you know it well. Look how much you've achieved already.

You're well, you just need a little more time and you'll fully recover. Don't forget we must produce a lot of little Stakhanò in whom we'll continue to live.'

'I don't think I can. But we'll try. Now.' Demetra smiled through tears and added: 'I guess you're right. I'll try to adapt to this new life.' Then she kissed him on the cheek. He bent his head, reaching her lips. His kiss was tender and comforting.

'Just for now. Later on we'll continue,' whispered he, releasing her.

'You know, when you caress me I feel the surge of energy. I think you should cuddle me more often and stay nearby.' Demetra continued to hold her arms around him.

'I wish I could too, but remember your doctor's advice: for your fast recovery you need gentle care. You know your nerve system needs rest, not wild excitement.'

'I don't care for doctor's ideas. I want to live a normal life.'

'This is why I stick to medical advices; for your fast recovery. Believe me, I want you so much, but I want you to be healthy, too,' he stated, kissing her on the cheek and stepping away from her. Demetra slid into her chair again, losing hope of being understood. As a Stakhanò, she was brought up to avoid any confrontation with anyone, especially with her husband. Keeping peace in the family was rule number one.

'I've decided to go out to see what's going on outside. I think we should look around for a more comfortable housing. I prefer my own meals cooked by us in our own flat. I know you agree with me. Be a good girl, lay down now and get some rest after the trip. Don't start unpacking. Leave everything as it is.'

'I need my dressing gown and bath toiletries.'

'Just tell me where they are and I'll get them for you,' he offered to help.

* * *

Half hour later, Marcus left the hotel and walked on the long street. Late morning usually was the busy time, with bars full of

people drinking their morning coffee, shopkeepers opening their shops. He remembered that street as one of the busiest ones. But that day it was completely empty: no people, no cars, and no transportation. Just quiet and empty. Few shops were open, but the majority was closed and the signs for sale or rent could be seen on many of them. Few people passed him and at last he decided to ask someone what was wrong with the city.

'It has been like this for the last two years. Tourists are not coming anymore. There are rumours about a new virus brought from Africa here to Italy. You know how it is with people, just one word and everybody runs away. We are depending on tourism. When there are no tourists, there is no money. We are trying to survive as we can. Are you new here?' The old man said, carefully studying Marcus, and then he added:

'You should be more careful walking alone like this nowadays. There are new gangs which attack passerby during the day. There are not enough policemen to watch over the streets.'

'I don't think they'll be interested in me.' Marcus assured him, but the worrying thought entered his brain. He noticed the streets had not been swept for some time, garbage and abandoned various things dropped near beautiful buildings, making them look unkempt, cheap and dirty.

As he continued his walk, he soon realised that Demetra could never live here and adapt to such conditions. She found difficult to live in London where streets were swept every day, at least in their area. She could walk knowing no gangs or any criminals could be around during daytime. Marcus thought he had to find a new solution to their problem. He knew she was missing her country, her house, her job. He wished he could get back all that she had lost. But how could he?

The thought which came to his mind during the conversion with Demetra returned again and this time he didn't push it aside. He decided to think more about it, inquire possibilities, and only then talking to Demetra about his decision.

After over two hours of walking and thinking, he made a decision to try the impossible, an unheard thing; it had to be done secretly from Demetra. She couldn't know about his idea and his attempts, in case he failed. He was glad she seemed to be determined to stay inside the hotel, which will give him the freedom to act.

Marcus smiled at his thoughts and turned back to the hotel, deciding to start his inquiries the day after.

* * *

It took much less time than he thought to find out and to arrange what he felt would have been the happiest thing for Demetra. Smiling and contented by his accomplishment, he entered their suite just before lunchtime.

Over a week had passed since they had arrived to Italy and stayed in the same hotel in Florence. Demetra stayed put inside the suite, just coming out on the balcony to take some fresh air, as she said. She never stepped out in the street. Looking at her, Marcus noticed that she looked contented and quiet, as if she had already made some decision.

'I wondered if you'll be in time for lunch,' she said, smiling at him.

'Let me take off overcoat and I'll be ready to order the meal. Today is a special day. We're celebrating a very important thing.' Marcus winked, noting Demetra's attention turning to him. Then he laughed, but without telling her what was it about yet.

'What's wrong with you? It looks like you hit the jackpot. How much did you get? Million?' Demetra wondered.

'I'll tell you after ordering our lunch, which must be special, as I've said before.'

She nodded and let him choose what he wanted. She, as usual, agreed on anything.

'Meantime, till they bring our food, we should put some music on, but since we do not have any, I guess we will just wait in silence wondering about our future.'

'What future? What has changed from yesterday? Did you get a job? Or in your wonderings around this old town you met some fairy who with her magic stick transformed us from poor common folk to rich, powerful oligarchs?' Demetra joked.

'I have got something very special for us but it has nothing to do with Italy. Wait and see,' he said. The knock at the door announced the arrival of their meal.

'Come in. It's not locked,' Marcus called. The door opened and the trolley was brought in by the old man, who seemed to take care of all their meals.

Over the past week, their suite has got some changes. A round dining table was brought in for them to have meals in the suite. In addition to it, the furniture was rearranged to make space for their luggage and let them move more freely.

'Thanks, you can go now. We'll take care of everything by ourselves.' Marcus said, giving some tip to the man and closing the door behind him. Demetra wondered what was wrong with her husband that day.

'I'll serve you.' He removed the covers to see what was there. 'There must be something very unusual if he is acting such way,' she thought.

After arranging the table and serving the first course, they began to eat, but he still didn't announce his news. It seemed like a usual lunch, with three courses and cheese and fruits, with the exception of a bottle of champagne, which was not opened yet.

At the end of the meal, Marcus winked at her: 'And now we will drink for... 'He stopped, charging the atmosphere with suspension and then burst out: 'in two days we'll be flying home.'

'Home? London?' Demetra seemed to be confused.

'No. To our home. Karsland.'

'Karsland? Viking Wish?' Demetra still could not grasp the meaning of his announcement.

Marcus swiftly reached her and lifting her from her seat, put his arms on her shoulders. Looking into her eyes, he stated pro-

nouncing each word slowly and clear: 'my dear wife, I've contacted Alexis and ask him if we could visit the country. He said in Karsland there were some changes, making it possible for us to return.' He lifted her chin and, brushing his lips with hers, added: 'I've seen you missed your home too much. There was no reason to stay in places which don't help you to recover your health. I've guessed if you'll be back to Karsland, to your home and everything that you had, you'll be the happiest person in the world.'

'I cannot be a Barbò. I don't think I'll be happy there. Who can give me the guarantee against spies of Spider Group?' Demetra whispered.

'Who said you must watch TV every day? You can read, write, study for a new profession, or shop. Million things and all the free time to do them.'

'I'm not sure I'll be allowed to do any of those.'

'Let's visit the country and see how things are there. Since they granted us an entry visa, it means there are some possibilities for arranging our life there. Alexis said we have nothing to be afraid of. He will help us to settle. He didn't explain himself but he said we can come and settle in your old house, which stayed empty all this time. Even my house is still waiting for me, he added.'

'*I cannot believe it. It's a miracle. This country brought us good luck. God bless Italy!*' The tears began to run down her face, but they were tears of happiness.

'Let me get something to dry my eyes.' She freed herself from his arms and went to the bedroom. As soon as she was back, Marcus opened the bottle, the cock burst fast noisy and the liquid bubbled out, spitting on the floor. He quickly filled their glasses.

'It's a real celebration when I see champagne bursting from the bottle.' Demetra laughed, lifting up her glass.

'I guess we've damaged the carpet.'

'Better to say, you've washed this dirty carpet,' she said and added: '*Let's drink to Italy, which brought us the luck.*'

'Are you sure of it? I thought you didn't care for this place.'

'I'm glad I didn't like it and, to please me, you found the best solution of all – bring us back where we belong to.' Her voice was happy and cheerful.

They drank at once and threw glasses to the stone walls, smashing them into a hundred pieces.

'For good luck!' Glancing at the floor, Marcus added: 'We should call someone to sweep. I wonder how much they will charge us for those glasses.'

'Who cares? We are going back to the most beautiful country in the world.'

'Repeat it please. I'm not sure I've heard it correctly.' Marcus joked, putting his hand to his ear.

'You know very well, I was always happy there. I loved my home, my job and I didn't care about anything else. You were the one who was not happy. Now you've seen how different it is being on vacation rather than living in a foreign country. Especially in old Europe, this is not Europe anymore.' Demetra turned to look at him directly into his eyes.

'I guess you must start to pack your things at once.' He rapidly changed the subject.

'There is nothing to pack. For all these days which we've spent here, I've used a few things, so that I'd be ready to pack in a few hours to move out. Two days are a lot of time for me. I want to know everything about your arrangements of our trip. Now.' Demetra sat comfortably in the sofa and looked questionably at him.

'Let's get rid of those dirty dishes and the rest. Then we can have all the time for us to discuss our upcoming trip, trip to home,' Marcus said, going to the switchboard and pressing the restaurant button.

Chapter 41

The sign 'Fasten your seat belt' came on, announcing they were landing.

Demetra shifted closer to the window and glanced through it. Her heart quivered at the sight of the green endless forest and numerous small lakes, surrounded by tall trees. The familiar sky, covered with thick gray clouds, and the sun trying to get through them, made her realised how badly she missed her country.

'We'll be landing soon. You should check your belt and straighten your seat. I know you cannot pull yourself away from the view, but you must,' Marcus reminded her.

'It's so beautiful, I can hardly believe that I'm looking at it again,' Demetra murmured, still staring through the window.

If someone would have told him that a seriously ill person at hearing of good news would get such burst of energy which was difficult to see in a healthy one, he could have never believed. She packed everything in a few hours, and nagged him every other hour on when they would leave.

The plane was departing from Rome and they had a long discussion on how to reach that city with their entire luggage, which consisted of more than twenty pieces. In the end, Marcus decided to order a taxi for a group of tourists. It was a small van which could accommodate their entire luggage.

'Do you think it's wise to do it? It must cost a fortune,' Demetra questioned him.

'Who cares? We are on our way home. We can never be poor there, can we? We can afford anything. Besides, we cannot take the train with all our things, unless you are ready to leave them behind,' Marcus laughed loudly.

'You know I could never do it.'

'It means all is decided and I am going to order the taxi for today late evening. You must be ready to spend the night at the airport and watch our luggage. Our plane takes off at seven am.'

Seeing her in such high spirits and contented, Marcus was sure of making the right decision. His hopes of her full recovery soured and, with it, his wish to have children looked more probable than before.

The plane landed smoothly and they were out quite quickly.

'Do you feel how clean and fine the air is? Here is paradise.' Demetra sounded drunk out of happiness and Marcus just nodded, not wanting to destroy her bliss by saying something wrong.

'I wonder how is my house and if all my things are still there. I bet...,' Demetra began but Marcus interrupted her: 'Let's get out of the airport with our entire luggage intact and then we will see how we can reach your house. I'm not so sure that Alexis will meet us. He may be at work.'

'He could have taken a day off.' Demetra added.

'Let's hope,' Marcus said, taking her by the elbow and propelling her to the entrance of the building. Karsland's main airport was small and passengers were walking to the customs.

As soon as they have entered the building, one of the security officers approached them and directed to the area designated for important visitors. They were surprised, but didn't question him.

The officer held the door open and, stepping in, they found themselves in a huge brightly-illuminated area, empty except for a few people.

Spotting newcomers, Alexis and Liz waved at them. Closing the distance fast, they hugged each other and Demetra could not hold her tears of happiness for being home at last. She even didn't get surprised at seeing Liz. No one spoke, just smiled and looked at each other. Alexis was the first to break the silence.

'You know Liz. We married a few months ago. She replaced her father, Mr Issel, as the head of the State Committee.' His news left them speechless.

'Let's move out of here. We'll speak at home. Do you have some baggage? That man could get it for you. Give me your receipts,' Liz offered.

'We have an extensive luggage, over twenty pieces.' Demetra managed to utter.

'Well, in that case, let me arrange them to be sent directly to your house. Wait a minute here.' Liz turned and went to the desk which was in the far corner of the area.

'I must congratulate you on your marriage. You didn't mention it on the phone.' Marcus looked quizzically at his brother.

'It's a long and complicated story. Let's leave it for tomorrow,' Alexis replied.

An awkward silence fell between them. Marcus was really shocked by his brother's marriage and as for Demetra; she was too stunned to even think about anything at all.

'Well, everything is arranged. Your baggage will be brought directly to your house in the afternoon. Let's move now.' Liz was back and taking Demetra's hand, turned to the exit.

'How about our passports check-in?' Demetra stopped and looked at Liz.

'Don't worry. You'll give them to me and I'll take care of it. You are at home and don't need passports anymore. It's just a procedure for foreigners, but you are Karslanders and there is no need to worry. Welcome home, Demetra,' Liz said and slightly pushed her to move.

Marcus and Alexis followed them silently. There was nothing more to say.

* * *

In two hours they would reach Demetra's house. Alexis was driving a luxury sedan which was assigned to Liz as the Head of the State.

It was very spacious and comfortable; on the back there was a small bar containing some soft drinks, a small screen and a panel with various buttons. As soon as they took their seats, Demetra's

energies suddenly disappeared and she could hardly move her legs and arms. Marcus was next to her and he sensed her problem.

'Do you want some water or a lemon drink?' He whispered to her, not wanting others to hear it.

'Lemon drink,' she replied resting her head on the pillow. Then she closed her eyes and fell into semiconscious.

'Drink it. I'll hold it for you,' she heard Marcus' voice coming from somewhere far away. 'Do you have some medicine with you?' She felt so weak that she couldn't reply to him. After sipping some liquid, Demetra felt slightly stronger.

'I have some tablets with me. Could you get my handbag please? Open it and look for a small silk bag with medication.' Finding it, he pulled the strings to open and showed her various packs of tablets.'

'These ones.' She pointed at one of them. Marcus opened it and got one small red pill which she swallowed with the drink.'

'I hope I'll get better before reaching the house,' she said and closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again, at first she couldn't orient herself. Then her head cleared and she recognised her own sitting room and the sofa on which she was lying. She cautiously moved her head.

'You are awake. We're having some tea. Liz is preparing it. Would you like to have some?' Marcus was near her, sitting on the stool.

'I would, but I need to stand up first. Can you help me?' Demetra murmured, still feeling too weak.

'We'll drink it here. Let me arrange it.'

'I need to stand up. I need to go to the…'

'Of course you do.' Marcus helped her to rise from the sofa and went with her to the corridor.

'How long we've been here?' Demetra asked.

'Over an hour, but we didn't want to disturb you. You needed some rest.'

'It's funny, I feel so weak. For several weeks I have been alright and now… it's so disquieting not to know what tomorrow will be. I was so sure I'd never felt these symptoms again.'

'I'm not surprised at your reaction. You forgot you're not in condition to support strong emotions: the arrival to Italy, staying in that awful hotel, worries about your surroundings, then the surprise about returning home, packing and etc. That was too much for you. I am sure in a few days you'll fully recover and we'll be able to see what's going on around us,' Marcus comforted her.

'Let's hope you're right. I'll be fast. Wait for me here,' Demetra said, entering her bedroom.

Marcus went to the kitchen. At his entrance Liz and Alexis looked questionably at him.

'Did she wake up? How is she?' Alexis quickly asked, with concern written on his face.

'Well, she's not so bad. I guess she was overexcited and tired from the packing. I hope she'll be alright tomorrow.'

'Do you think she'll agree for me to check her? I think she needs some medical advice.'

'She is getting short of her medication. Maybe those are not helping too much. Anyway, let's leave this subject for tomorrow. I am also quite tired. When will our luggage arrive? I need some of my things now,' Marcus asked, looking at Liz. Glancing at her watch, she replied: 'I guess in one hour time they will bring them. We'll be here as long as you need us. I am going to order some food; we have to eat dinner, don't we?' Liz glanced at Alexis, who said: 'I am not hungry yet.'

'I am impatient to know about the others who were left behind. Do you…,' Marcus began but was immediately interrupted by Liz: 'It's better to check on Demetra, don't you think Marcus? Let's leave all curiosity aside for tomorrow. Alexis will come to pick up both of you and we'll have lunch at our place and there we can answer to all your questions.'

'I hope I didn't interrupt something.' Demetra stood on the

threshold supporting her at the doorframe. Her eyes looked as two wide bright saucers on her white face, resembling a mask. One glance at her told Marcus she was forcing herself beyond her limits. She should be in bed, he thought, but he was not sure how to say it for not making others to see her real condition.

'Is your room in order? Let me have a look at it.' Marcus rose quickly from the chair and reaching Demetra whispered something into her ear.

'Excuse us for a moment. We'll be back,' she apologised, letting Marcus to lead her out of the room.

Alexis and Liz exchanged glances in silence; each of them remembering the past and the revolt, which left so many Karslanders with broken hearts and health. As time passed slowly, they continued to sit and wait for Marcus to return, but it looked like he could not. Liz stood up and began to clean after tea.

'Go to the sitting room. As soon as I finish here, I'll come to join you there. Sofa and armchairs are more comfortable to sit than this small stool,' she insisted. Alexis rose silently, just nodded and left the room. Once he had left Liz alone, she heavily plonked into the nearest chair and hid her face in her hands.

Million of various thoughts ran in her head and none of them was comforting. She knew that Demetra's illness was due to the orders given by Robert's Young, assistant of her father. Demetra should have never been arrested, not to mention about the torture. She was a weak and gentle girl, who couldn't withstand such assault on her nerve system. The idiotic expression on Anissia's face, who never recovered from the terrible drugs used on her and was left paralysed for the rest of her life, came up to her mind. Odin's face, full of hate and condemnation, came up to her, as well. Liz couldn't blame herself for all that happened back then.

'Come, Liz. The van with the luggage has arrived.' The call of Alexis brought her back to the present. Shaking her head as to get free of gloomy thoughts, she rose quickly and went out.

'It's unbelievable! How someone can travel with such an ex-

tensive gear. I wonder if they have a list of all these cases, bags, etc. I'd not be surprised if some of things had been lost during their flight.' Alexis commented, watching two workers who were bringing, one after the other, the various pieces. The good-sized pile was already in the middle of the room and continued to grow.

'Don't forget these,' Liz entered the room, 'is all that they had living there. I don't think it's too much, remembering our own things. I'm really glad they're back, although we must think over how to settle them into our country's life.'

Alexis just looked at her without saying anything. He seemed confused or distracted by all that was around him. Liz didn't expect any replies, knowing well what disturbed him and having no way to change it.

'That's all, ma'am.' The officer, who was at the airport, entered the house and reported to her.

'Did you check if there was anything lost or forgotten?'

'There are twenty four pieces.'

'Thanks. You can go now. If something is missing, I'll call you.' Liz dismissed him with a wave of her hand. After closing the door behind the man, she turned to Alexis.

'I guess our mission is over for today. We should leave now. Could you ask your brother if they want some food? If not, we'll leave at once. I'm tired too. It was a long and stressful day. Tomorrow I have an important meeting.'

'I would not disturb them. You saw Demetra is not well and he is at the edge of a breakdown. I should wait here for a while till he joins us and we'll decide what we'll do next.'

'Alright, I'll wait.' Liz agreed, stretching her on the sofa and closing her eyes.

Alexis continued to sit in the armchair with a distracted face. He blamed himself for being too busy with his job, for not paying attention to what was around him. He knew it was too late to be sorry, the past was gone and he had to face the present with courage.

Meantime, Demetra was lying on her bed and crying out. Marcus was sitting in the armchair, silent and irritated, but patient. He knew that her tears were a way of getting rid of dreadful memories and of feeling the happiness of being back home, even if they didn't know what could be of them in the future. He didn't care of being a Barbò and, knowing his brother was married to the President of the country, he hoped they would help them.

By the noise coming from outside, he knew that their luggage had been delivered.

'I'll leave you for a moment. The baggage arrived and they are waiting for us.' He said and left the room without waiting for her reply. He was met by Alexis who stood up at his appearance.

'Oh, they're here. I guess it's all that we have.' Marcus commented at the sight of their stuff, which filled a good part of the room.

'Would you like something for dinner? I'll order at once,' Liz offered, rising from the sofa too.

'I am not hungry at all, but Demetra…'

'Let me order something for you. We'll have our dinner at home. I guess you need to be alone.'

'I wanted to speak about…,' Marcus began.

'All the talk we'll leave it for tomorrow.' Liz quickly interrupted him.

'It would be nice to have something to eat. Order some *spaghetti* and *a pizza margherita*, Demetra likes it.' Marcus uttered reluctantly.

Liz took the phone and looked at Alexis. Marcus glanced at him, but didn't say anything. He got an impression, that his brother was not a happy man, but he didn't know why yet. He remembered Anissia and how his brother's face lighted just speaking about her. Alexis' marriage with Liz shook Marcus. He was waiting for the moment when he could speak to his brother alone. There were changes here and it looks like not all of them were good, Marcus thought, still looking at his brother. 'I'll be back,

just telling to Demetra about our luggage arrival. Call me when food is delivered.' He said and left, not wanting to stay and see his brother's misery.

'I would have never imagined that Demetra could be so ill after such a long time,' Liz said in a low voice.

'Wouldn't you? How about Anissia?' Alexis sounded harsh. Liz shuddered at his words, as if he had hit her, but she didn't reply. She knew whom fault it was. Instead, she moved closer to Alexis and put her arms around his neck: 'You know I love you. I'll do whatever is needed to correct my father's mistakes.'

'I hope so. I…' The door bell rang and he could never finish his sentence.

'I'll open,' Liz readily ran to the door.

After taking two bags from the delivery boy, she turned for Alexis to get his identification card for the registration of food.

'I know you,' the boy said, 'you are our new President, aren't you?' His face blushed at his own impertinence, but it seemed like he was so taken aback at seeing Liz that he could not hold his words back.

'I am,' she said benevolently smiling at him.

'I always wanted to meet someone from the State. I am so happy now.' He got the courage to speak to her.

'Take it. Register and go. We are late already,' Alexis briskly interrupted, giving him the card.

'Yes, sir,' the boy quickly replied, registering the purchase.

'Thank you for using our e-line,' he added and went out.

'You spoiled his mood. How could you? The boy was so happy to be useful to someone in the authority, but you just threw him out. You know we must always be benevolent to common people. They should always think that we care for them. It was not wise of you to be sharp and unfeeling. Try to change your attitude,' Liz reprimanded her husband. Alexis stayed quiet. He knew he was wrong, but he could not be hypocrite; he also knew there was no way to correct his biggest mistake in life: to get involved with Liz

and then to chain himself to her for the rest of days. But most of all, he missed his work, which he enjoyed so much.

'Go and tell Marcus that the food is ready and we are leaving now,' Liz commanded. Alexis silently obeyed and almost at once both brothers returned to the sitting room.

'Thanks for everything. We could never expect such warm welcome,' Marcus said, smiling at Liz.

'It's nothing. You're the only brother of Alexis and I have no siblings. We are the only four who should stick together. Welcome home!' Liz replied and glancing at Alexis added: 'We are leaving now. See both of you tomorrow. I'll send the car at 12 o'clock. I hope it is alright for you.'

'It is.' Marcus hugged his brother, then Liz and opened the door for them.

The following day would hold the answers to all his questions.

* * *

Demetra was glad that lunch with Liz and Alexis was over. Saying she was not well, Marcus asked Alexis to bring them back home as soon as possible. There was no question of ignoring her plea; everybody knew she was very ill.

They spent the half hour drive to her house in silence, knowing each word would be registered. They dared not to say anything which could be wrongly interpreted.

'I need some strong coffee after such an abundant meal. Could you please make it for us?' Demetra pleaded, taking off her overcoat and scarf. 'I feel much cooler here than in Italy.'

'For sure you are. April in Italy is like July here, did you forget about it?' Marcus laughed and lifted his eyebrows: it was the sign between them to speak in sign language.

'What's the matter? She got surprised at his request.

'I think we should visit Thomas Askold,' he signed.

'Do you think he is still there?'

'Why not. We were not told about his death. It means he's there.'

'We'll drink coffee with him,' Demetra agreed and put on her coat again.

They left the house and crossing the lawn reached Thomas' entrance door. The bell rang loud, but no one seemed to be answering it. At last, they heard some movement behind the door. It opened a bit showing them a face, never seen before.

'Is Thomas home?' Demetra asked.

'There is no Thomas' here. I've lived here for the past six months.' The voice sounded annoyed and crossed.

'I'm Demetra Vanderson, your neighbour.'

'Ah, I was told you ran abroad with your husband. No one told me you were back. If I knew, I would have never moved to this house. Good day.' She slammed the door into their faces. It was a big shock for Demetra to have such a nasty neighbour, instead of the nice, accommodating Thomas. Well, they could do nothing about it, just try to be polite and never cross paths with her.

'I wonder what's happened to Thomas and who that "loyal" woman is.' Demetra said, sipping her favourite coffee.

'We'll find out soon.' Marcus was sure there was some mistake. He couldn't believe that Thomas would be reduced to Barbò and moved to a hi-rise building. But why not, if Odin got stripped of the status Stakhanò and was moved to one of the remotest areas, far from Viking Wish, as Alexis said.

'We'll visit Odin, and he will tell us what's going on in this country. Liz can say what she wants, but she is the President and her job is to keep the country quiet and prosperous, the same as it was during her father's rule. She'll never do anything to hazard her position or let someone replace her,' Marcus signed. Demetra sensed his frustration.

'I thought if you want, we could move to your house. Bohemian area is less supervised and controlled by Guardians. Your house is identical to this one and I don't think your brother and your-sister-in-law would have any objections to our transfer.' Demetra suggested.

'Oh, no. I don't want you to lose your house. This neighbour is a shrew. When she'll see you moved out, she'll do everything to get some of her friends in here. Her loyalty is her ticket to the State's riches. She knows it and using it to get what she wants.'

'When will we see Odin?' Demetra changed the subject.

'As soon as I can get a car. Tomorrow Alexis and I will look for one. I'll buy it at once. We must be free to move on our own.'

'I'll go with you. I want to see what you get.'

'First, let me get my own car; then I will take you to choose another which you like: we are going to use two cars. They will be a present from Alexis.'

'You mean a gift? But we're not Stakhanò anymore.' Demetra's words offended Marcus.

'Yes, we're not. Liz confirmed our status is Barbò. Barbò cannot have a house and a car. But we are her relatives and, as relatives of the ruling elite, we can have all that we need,' Marcus stated. Demetra choose not to reply, but the expression on her face was proud and stubborn.

'I know one day Liz will reinstate us the status of Stakhanò and all privileges will return with it. Be patient.' He moved closer to her, lifted her from the stool and pulled her to him. The only way he knew to comfort her was to cuddle her.

'I'll be patient,' she whispered, thinking he knew better on what and how to do it to arrange their life in Karsland. For over a year she had dreamed of being in her home and thanks to him, she now was. What more could she want? Nothing. Alexis promised to take her to the best neurologist for a consultation and she knew he will keep his word. Even if she wanted to work, her health would not let her do it. She had no physical strength and any small thing which is out of normal made her so nervous and weak that she needed to recover in bed. Being Barbò, she was getting everything she needed without any work, stress or worries. She always regarded Barbò as poor simpletons who must obey to others, but now, being ill, she recognised that Barbò were very

lucky to get everything they needed, including excellent medical care.

* * *

At the loud sound of a car horn, Demetra opened the door and stopped in the doorframe. The sight of smiling Marcus getting out from a new, medium-size sedan of silver colour left her breathless.

'Don't tell me you got this beauty with your card?' Demetra reached the vehicle and gently stroked the car hood. 'It's marvellous, dream-like.'

'Present from my brother's family,' Marcus replied with ease. 'Liz said if you need a car for you, please be free to choose what you like.'

'Wait and see.' Demetra said and quickly turned back to the house, feeling the cold breeze reaching her back. She didn't care to get ill and stay home, instead of getting a ride in such fine vehicle. It was not exactly as luxurious as Liz's, but it was in the category of expensive cars which she could never get.

In Karsland, everything was free for its citizens, but the citizens were divided by level of standing and each level had its own goods. Barbò could never have a car due to living in an apartment, but they were free to use taxis as much as they needed. As for Stakhanò, having a house with garage, they had the right to have a car. The size of the vehicle depended on their position: the higher the position – the bigger and more luxurious the car. Being an engineer, Demetra could have just a small to medium vehicle, with basic accessories. Liz's present was of ruling elite's level and Demetra wondered if they would be asked for something in return.

'If you will be strong, tomorrow we'll ride to Odin. Alexis gave me directions to his town and his building. It will take over two hours to reach him, but I don't want to take the risk of calling him on the phone before our arrival. He must be under strict supervision. It'll be enough if our new car is full of bugs and Guardians will know where we are going.'

'Welcome home,' Demetra said, making him laugh heartily, 'I don't know how to dress for this visit. Martina is always dressed with the latest fashion, but I am still wearing clothes from two years ago. Maybe we could go for a short shopping to get something new for me.' Demetra pondered, hesitating. Marcus continued to laugh.

'I am glad I've brought you back. It's the first time in over year you're speaking about fashion and your appearance. Thank God you're getting better. For sure, we can spend the afternoon looking for your new clothes, but I wouldn't do it for a different reason: Odin is now Barbò and Martina has always been Barbò. Don't you think if they see you so fashionably dressed, getting out from a new sedan, they could regard us as outsiders and we'll lose them as friends? You should dress up nice but not too fashionable. Martina will accept you as you were before,' Marcus suggested to her. Demetra stood silent for a while, thinking about his words.

'I'll do as you suggested. I didn't think about their recent situation. I am so happy to be home that I think everyone is as happy as me. The revolt, the punishment, the exile, all of those I haven't seen being too ill. You saved me by bringing us to London and in the meantime there were changes here and now we are back under different conditions. Alexis saved all of us by sacrificing his own life. Did you notice how he takes care of poor Anissia? I still see her sitting in that expensive wheelchair, idiotic expression on her face and Alexis near her, with tears in his eyes. I am sure he married Liz to get expensive medical care for Anissia. Poor Anissia!' Demetra stopped, her eyes shining with tears. Marcus was silent. What could be said in the face of such tragedy? Alexis was an excellent doctor and he did his best for the girl, whom he loves. He gave her a permanent home, medical treatment, two nurses round the clock taking care of her. Liz got an excellent husband who will be always faithful, courteous and nice to her.

Chapter 42

They left the house soon after breakfast. After few kilometres of highway, at the sign to 'Happy End', they turned right and continued on asphalt road for several more kilometres until it was replaced by an unmade road full of small holes, filled with water left by a recent rain.

'If someone would have told me that in Karsland such roads were existing, I could never believe it. If this road continues to worsen, we'll be forced to turn back. I don't want to be stuck in this part of the country. Look, there is nothing here: no bars, no small shops, no one around, I wonder why,' Marcus complained, trying to avoid the holes in the road.

'Maybe we took the wrong direction. This is some kind of secondary road. There must be a main one,' Demetra said, looking through the window.

'Alexis said it will take two hours to reach them, but up to now nothing is in sight.' Marcus was apprehensive. Then suddenly Demetra glimpsed some hi-rise buildings.

'I can see a village in front of us,' she voiced, pointing the finger in front and to the right.

'It must be that,' Marcus agreed, wondering what they would find there. As they proceeded, the asphalt road reappeared again and their mood went up. The end of their journey seemed to be near.

At the sight of three five-story buildings, gray, square shaped, without balconies and numerous antennas on their roofs, Demetra's heart squeezed with pain. It reminded her of the prison which she saw in one movie, back in London. She glanced at Marcus, but he was too busy driving.

Barbò areas in Viking Wish were parks full of majestic trees

and beautifully arranged flower beds and antique-type benches between them. But there? Few young trees were placed in array, nothing indicated that someone was working or was prepared to do some gardening. It looked gloomy and deserted. There was no parking area, no cars.

'I guess we can park where we want. Which building is theirs?' Marcus said, driving closer to the nearest one and switching off the engine. They came out and looked around them, wondering which way to take. There were no indication signs, no one around to ask.

'They live in the block B. Since there are three of them, this one in front of us must be the one. Let's move.' Marcus went directly to the building in front of them. Demetra followed him.

On the right side of the entrance door was a panel intercom. Marcus pressed the button 251 and waited.

'Maybe they're out,' Demetra whispered.

'Don't be silly.' Marcus snapped at her. 'Don't you see what's here?'

'Maybe their bell is not working.'

'Where? Here? You are not in old Europe. There is no question about something not working or being broken. This country is methodically organized and it cannot be otherwise. Comocratia means a perfect machine keeping everything and everyone in order,' Marcus furiously shouted at her. Demetra stepped back and turned her face to look at the sky, covered with gray clouds, which she loved so much. She empathized with his anger and resentment but what could she do?

After a long wait, they heard the sound of a door unlocking and Marcus grasped the handle and pulled the door open.

'Follow me,' he quickly went in. They were in a small squire hall, with a few steps leading up. Ascending those, they stopped and looked on both sides, where a long corridor with doors ran.

'Their apartment must be on the second floor. There are stairs. I guess there is no lift here. You can make it, can't you?'

'For sure I can.'

'Then let us move,' Marcus said and began to ascend the stairs. Demetra slowly went after, holding to the handrail. Reaching the stairwell, Marcus oriented himself.

'This way,' he said turning to the left and moving in wide strides along the corridor. He stopped in front of the door and knocked. Turning to her, he waved to come forward. The sound of the door opening and loud greetings reached Demetra.

'Oh, my God! It's the best present of the year!' Odin took Marcus by the hand and pulling him into the apartment, he hugged him so tight that Marcus could hardly breathe.

'Wait, wait, not so hard. I need some air.' He tried to free himself. 'There is Demetra. Let her in.'

'Odin, let him go,' Martina insisted and seeing Demetra added: 'So happy to see you again. We thought you'll never be back and will be lost somewhere in old Europe.' Martina hugged the girl and kissed her on the cheek.

'I was homesick and Marcus managed to arrange our return.'

'Well, well, his sister-in-law is the President of the State, as I've heard, and she could never refuse his request. Just to make her father sick by bringing some rebels back. It is her way to repay the old man for the miserable life he made for her. If you could have seen the chaos she created and how smartly she removed him from his chair!' Odin grinned.

'Let them take off their overcoats first, Odin. They are anxious to hear all the news, I can bet, but not standing with an opened door to the corridor and neighbours listening to you.' Martina interrupted the word's flow, slightly pulling Demetra in and firmly closing the door. Then she turned to Odin: 'show your visitors our sitting room; in the meantime I'll prepare some tea.'

'She is right. Give me your coats, I'll hang them,' Odin said and pointing to his left he added: 'That way is our main room. I wouldn't dare to call it "a sitting room".

They entered the room, the size of it could compete only with

the one they had in London. But if the sitting room in London was artistically and expensively decorated, that one was deprived of anything except of a few necessities such as a table, few metal chairs and a small sideboard with a few cups and plates. The floor was linoleum, the thin cotton curtains hang on the windows and a huge 44 inches TV screen was attached to the wall. It was on, but soundless. Catching Demetra's look on it, Odin explained:

'We have no way to control it. It switches on automatically at 9 am and goes on up to 9 pm. All that we can do is to remove the sound. Anyway, ignore it.'

Both, Demetra and Marcus, didn't say a word, being shocked by the living conditions of Odin, the man with brilliant brain and generous heart.

'Tea is ready.' Martina entered the room carrying a round tray. 'Sit down, all of you. Let's drink some hot tea. During this period of the year the central heating system is switched off and soon you'll feel the cold coming through these concrete walls.'

'How long have you lived here?' Marcus asked, hoping he didn't offend his hosts.

'The next day following the results of referendum, I was stripped of Stakhanò status and brought to this apartment. Martina arrived later, bringing some of our things. My library, all my collections were confiscated. Basically I was left with a few pants and tops, and two pair of shoes. Well, I should be grateful to Liz for sparing my life.' Odin stopped and sipped some tea, and then he continued: 'She is a strange girl. One day she called me and she told me what happened to my parents. My grandfather was Stakhanò and my grandmother was Barbò, the same as me and Martina. She died mysteriously and my grandfather accused the Issels of killing her. He was arrested and died in prison. My parents were killed in a car accident and Albert Issel took me under his wing to make loyal citizen out of me. But my destiny was to meet and marry Martina. I guess the blood is thicker than water, as the old saying goes.' He stopped again and looked at Martina

who was tensed and sad; he smiled: 'I would repeat all that I did, just to show my wife that my love is still the same as before.' Martina blushed, embarrassed by his words.

Listening to Odin's revelations, Marcus looked closer at his friend and couldn't believe what he saw. Instead of big, well-fed, well-dressed, happy man, he faced a lean old man with wrinkles, gray hair and dressed in old greased clothes hanging from his shoulders.

'Don't make such faces. I'm not dead yet. There is no life here. This is a prison. As you've noted, there are no shopping areas, no recreational areas. We are allowed to get what we need by ordering it only. On the ground floor there is a common room for our needs.' Noticing Marcus glancing at his clothes, Odin added: 'From the first day I entered this apartment; I've decided never to get anything which is not necessary for our survival. Clothes as well.'

'I don't think you can use the same clothes for the next fifty years, can you?'

'I'll get new ones once these are worn out. My brain still works. I am trying to study the history, the real history, of Europe and then to put down what I think about it. We have no access to Internet, but I still have some friends who supply me with text books. I have the right to study and I am doing just that. Come, see my study.' Odin rose from the chair. They followed him into another room which was smaller, but filled up to the top with shelves full of books and files.

'This is my sanctum.' Odin proudly stated.

'If you need more books I'll get them for you,' Marcus offered his help at once.

'I know you can, but not now. First you need to settle. I bet it will not be easy for you. Guardians are on, nothing changed. Maybe Liz is softer than her father in some cases, but her determination in keeping the ruling of country in her family's hands can never be changed. The results of referendum confirmed that

Barbò prefer to have a lazy life and die of illness than to work and be free.'

'As for freedom, I am not so sure, if there such thing exists,' Marcus said, looking at Odin.

'This matter, we could discuss for hours but I don't think it's interesting to Demetra.' Odin stepped to the door. 'Martina, could you show Demetra around?'

'For sure. Let's leave the men alone,' Martina smiled and taking Demetra by the hand moved along the corridor. 'There is really nothing to see in this flat,' she added, opening one door after the other revealing two small bedrooms and two closets, any of those, which were almost empty.

'In summer is quite hot here, but luckily it's only for two months. This village and these particular three buildings are different from the rest of Barbò area due to the restrictions applying to them. We're not allowed to have conditioners and many electrical appliances, washing machines are in common and so on.' Demetra listened to her with sad and broken heart. Martina's plain dark clothes were slightly better than Odin's and Demetra was glad of wearing a sober dress and no accessories.

'We didn't get permission to see our children. Odin took it very badly, I understand him well. He hoped, being Stakhanò, he would raise his children by himself. No such luck,' Martina uttered, turning away to hide her tears.

Suddenly, Demetra could not stand the tragedy of these people anymore. She wanted to run away, to be far from that misery and psychological torture inflicted to them.

'I guess I could have some more tea, if you don't mind,' she said, rapidly turning to the door and almost running to the main room. 'I know I'm behaving stupidly but it's stronger than me. Where are my pills?' She thought, plunking on her chair and looking at the TV screen. Martina's desperate face was still in her mind and the slight vibrations which Demetra felt inside her were the warning of a coming nerves attack.

'Do you need some water? I'll call Marcus.' Martina worried being lost at Demetra's reaction.

'No, let them be alone. It'll pass soon.' Demetra took her pill with the tea. 'Could you make some more tea? I'm feeling cold,' she said wanting to be alone for a while.

Meantime in Odin's room both men continued to study each other, trying to determine if they could still be friends.

'Where are you staying?' Odin quietly asked.

'At Demetra's house. It was left untouched. By the way, where is Thomas Askold, her neighbour?'

'He was transferred in one of Barbò's area in Viking Wish. He was spared of harsh treatment due to his age and being alone.'

'Demetra's new neighbour is a screw.'

'I know her. She was one of the prison guards who watched female prisoners.'

'My God, what a punishment to have such neighbour!' Marcus infuriated.

'You should try something to get rid of her unless you want each of your moves to be registered by the Guardians,' Odin grinned, but Marcus took his words seriously, wondering if she could really do it.

'"Boar's head" is closed,' Odin began with the sign language. 'We cannot speak openly here. Only in this closet and with the use of the sign language I can tell Martina what I think about our life. Here there is no CCTV, but in other rooms, I'm not sure.' He stopped, but Marcus was silent and then Odin continued: 'The State will keep me here till my death, I know it. I applied for going abroad, but Liz refused. I'm sorry now not to have followed your advice to run abroad with you. It's true, you came back, but maybe for me it could be more tolerable to accept that life. Liz said I'm too dangerous to let me go. What can I do now? I'm desperate and depressed from the misery which they put me in. Well, I knew I'd be Barbò, but I didn't expect to be brought to this place.'

'I'll try to speak to Albert Issel and Liz to see if they could transfer you to a better area, can I?' Marcus offered, determined to help his friend.

'I don't think you will succeed. It's a matter of principle and pride. I tried to get rid of this hateful comocratia, but I failed. I am paying for my ambitions and revenge for my family. Somehow, it became a fight between myself and the Issel's' family. The ruling elite were smarter than me and they knew better about Barbò character. I saw only the poor creatures that were reduced on the level of brainless slaves. But the elite knew these creatures are lazy, overindulged by good life and they would never consider changing their conditions. What do Barbò care for a few who died? They are told from childhood, you are born to die. One more year, one year less, no difference to them. But to work as their ancestors did, never have enough of what they need, it was a step to their past deprivation and they didn't want it. Let these fools be as they are since they don't have brains, intellect or logic. They don't know the difference between the real freedom and slavery portrayed as freedom.' Odin stopped, and then added: 'I am tired of gesticulation; the sign language is very tiresome.' Marcus laughed heartily: 'I understand you.'

'Let's join our halves. You must stay for lunch. Martina is an excellent cook. We have for today…' Odin stopped at the entrance of the main room.

One look at Demetra was enough for Marcus to make the decision. 'It's better for us to go now. I guess Demetra is tired. She'd never fully recovered after her interrogations by Robert Young,' he said, quickly reaching her. Seeing her pale face without any expression, he added: 'Thanks for everything. We'll have lunch some other time.'

'I'm alright.' Demetra managed to whisper, but he knew it was not true.

'Odin, bring their coats, please. Don't forget the scarves.' Martina commanded in a low voice, afraid to disturb the girl.

When they were ready to leave, Odin hugged Marcus and Martina kissed Demetra on her cheek. All of them feeling sad and fearing that it could be the last time they see each other.

'I know we'll be together soon again. What's wrong with us? It looks like we are in mourning instead of being happy to see each other after such a long time.' Odin's loud voice, full of hope, dispersed the gloom. Marcus promised to return again or to see them for lunch in Viking Wish, since Odin didn't need a permission to move freely in the country.

Chapter 43

'Do you think he'll grant my request?' Demetra asked Marcus on their way to the meeting with Mr Albert Issel. 'I hope his anger is gone and he'll be reasonable.'

'It's difficult to predict his reaction when dealing with such person. Personally, I don't think he'll be agreeable,' Marcus replied, without moving his eyes from the road. They were in the car going to Issel's residence.

Over three weeks had passed since their return to Karsland, but they were far from settling down into their routine. It's true; they were allowed to live in their old houses. The authorities were polite and respectful, but it was not enough for them. Demetra could not accept her Barbò status, or trying to adjust to it. She wanted to work, as she continued to tell to Marcus, ignoring her health condition.

At first, Demetra categorically refused to visit a neurologist, saying she was well enough for going on with her life. Only after Marcus reminded her that in order to get a work permit she needed to pass medical examination she agreed to see one.

Alexis arranged a consultation for her with one of the best neurologists in Karsland. His conclusion was that Demetra needed a rehabilitation program, which was offered in the main hospital in Viking Wish. The professor stressed to her that it may take several months, if not more, to recover her central nerve system. He pointed out that, in some cases, there were no chances to reinstate it to its normal functions. During her rehabilitation period, she would have a nurse assigned to her and a servant as well, to take care of the housework. Demetra was devastated by the doctor's conclusion.

'It's all your relatives' job!' She jumped at her husband. 'I'm

alright and capable to do anything. Who did the housework in London? And it was one year ago. Today I'm stronger. You know it well.' She was hurt by the doctor's verdict, besides she didn't believe one word. 'It's a plot against me,' she angrily stated.

'Don't speak nonsense. The doctor is a famous professor; he knows his job. If he said you need medical treatment, it's true. You should be proud he'd agreed to examine you,' Marcus defended him.

'That famous neurologist could never refuse to examine someone who is related to the President of the country. It's no big deal. The present position of Alexis as one of the five directors of the main hospital by appointment of Liz, who is his wife, made him the most influential man there.'

'I agree with you but it still has nothing to do with your health. I agree you could be examined by any other neurologist but the result would be the same: you need a rehabilitation program,' Marcus said and then added: 'Be glad you're only three days in that hell of torture and your body was able to recover to your present condition. Think about Anissia. Look what's happened to her after a real interrogation and sophisticated torture. She's left paralyzed forever, without any possibility to regain her life.'

'I know. I feel sorry for her and Alexis. Every time I see him, he looks so sad and unhappy that I wonder how Liz can handle it. At least he should be contented to sit in that comfortable armchair, in his luxury office instead of working as a plain medical doctor specialised on autopsies. Burr,' Demetra speculated.

'I thought the same, but knowing him better, I've realised he is missing his everyday's plain medical work, to examine patients, or even to perform autopsies. He is a medical doctor who loves his job. But Liz cannot afford to have just a plain doctor for husband. It's not good for her image. Alexis is paying for his sacrifice of marrying Liz.'

'Speaking of Liz, I've never understood how, being Barbò, she'd replaced her father and got status of Stakhanò.'

'Well, there is nothing unusual about it among the ruling elite. I guess Albert did some mistake and she used it to take over him. I've always thought she was a tricky one, but I've never caught her at doing something suspicious. I've never had proofs.'

'What more proof do you need? It's all here: she is the President of the State now and maybe forever. Alexis may not be happy, but he is living with her, which means he can manage their life together,' Demetra concluded.

'We are almost there,' Marcus said, driving through the opened iron gate and continuing on the long driveway in the direction of the house.

The courtyard was empty and Marcus parked the car near the house. The bright light from the lamp pole illuminated it. The old-fashioned bronze doorknocker was in the centre of a heavy door. Marcus grabbed its ring and hit its base for a few times. The strange metal sound broke the silence and, almost at once, the entrance door opened widely revealing a middle-aged man dressed in butler's livery.

'Madam is waiting for you,' announced he. They stepped in. The huge high-ceilinged hall, which she remembered so well, was gloomy and cold exactly as she had imaged it on that day of the party.

'Follow me, please,' the man added and began to walk.

Crossing the entrance hall, they entered a long narrow corridor and at the end of it they spotted a bright light coming from one of the open doors. They entered into the anteroom.

'Demetra, Marcus, at last! I began to wonder where you were,' Liz greeted them apprehensively, but still with a smile on her thin face. She looked regal in a long dress of wine colour, embroidered with tangles of gold roses and on her dress was shining a diamond pin, identical to the one of Albert Issel and Mel Sharon. Her hair was up as usual, but it was held by an intricate amber comb, incrusted with two rows of diamonds.

'She is overdressed for a meeting with us or maybe it is her way

to show us and her father who is in charge,' Demetra thought, exchanging glances with Marcus who seemed of having the same thoughts.

'My father will meet you in his study. This way,' she said, turning to her left. After a short walk, they reached the closed door which she knocked.

'Come in,' at the sound of permission, Liz opened it and let them in.

It was a big room, very dark due to the walls covered with shelves full of books. In the far corner, Demetra spotted the elaborated writing desk which was so big that Mr Albert Issel could be hardly seen; he was practically lost in his huge armchair. At their appearance, he stood up and moved towards them.

'What a surprise!' He smiled, but his eyes were hard and cold: 'I could never imagine that you would risk returning back to us. Well, you are lucky, our new President,' he distastefully glanced at Liz, 'is generous enough to let you have your old houses and comfortable life here.'

'We prefer to live here than in old Europe. Demetra was homesick, so I've asked the authorities to get permission to return,' Marcus explained.

'And the new President gave you her kind permission,' Issel concluded, looking at Demetra who stood silent, waiting for her turn to speak. 'I was told you wanted to speak with me. I just cannot figure out what we can discuss with you. But since Liz, our new President, insisted, I agreed.' His voice was harsh and he sounded rude, making Demetra to wonder if she had done a mistake by asking for appointment. Maybe Marcus was right to tell her it was useless to come here.

'I would like to speak with you privately. Alone,' she said, looking directly into the old man's face. He wrinkled his nose, but nodded to others to leave.

The old man plunked back into his armchair, but he didn't offer Demetra to sit. 'Let her stand,' he thought, pursing his lips.

'Well, what is so important that you wanted to speak to me about?' He twisted his lips, seeing her discomfort, but keeping her standing.

'You don't want to speak to me. You didn't want to meet me. Everybody else may think it's because I am still recovering from the tortures which you had no right to expose me to. But you know the real reason why I wanted to see you and you didn't want to hear what I have to tell you. Your daughter is better than you and thanks to her I have the chance to let you hear what I have to say.' Demetra stopped to take some air and then she continued: 'You know I'm not here to speak about *Stimulazer*, the device which is horrible by it. I am here to tell you that, thanks to you, I was kidnapped, by miracle I've survived two attempts on my life and was accused of the death of an innocent man. Can you guess why all those things happened to me? There were two small sheets of paper which I absently put into my pocket during our expedition to one of the northern caves. I completely forgot about them, and if it wasn't for the revolt I could still be living my normal life, without knowing that I am holding the clue to the biggest cover-up. This is why I was arrested and tortured with the use of psychological drugs. You needed to know where *those papers* were, and if you could get them from me. It seems you were not able to get the answer and you were waiting for the right time to eliminate me. I don't blame you, not even for that. You did what you thought was right in order to protect your position and to prevent changes in the country.'

'No one needs to remember the past,' Issel swiftly interrupted her, 'What's done is done. You're free, your health is back. My daughter married your brother-in-law and there is nothing to speak about.' She was taken aback by his outburst. His face was blushing, his eyes were blood-red and hands clenched into fists and bit on the top of the table. Her knees failed to hold her and she fell into the nearest chair.

'I said we have nothing to discuss here. Why did you sit now?'

He began to shout at her. Her mind got confused; she forgot what she wanted to say to him. With tremendous force, she managed to pull herself together. '*I cannot leave here without pleading for Odin, even if this awful person in front of me does not want to talk about it. I must.*' Her rational thought returned and she was able to say loud: 'Mr Issel, I can understand how you feel about everything but you should not blame others for your mistakes. I can imagine why you hate Odin, but you cannot let a brilliant, smart, highly-intelligent person to rot in that place. At least let him transfer to a more comfortable area.'

'Ah, now I know why you wanted to see me: to plead for that traitor, that snake which I warmed on my chest. I tried to make a loyal, obeying citizen out of him. I've helped him in his studies, with his promotion. But I didn't take into account the old sayings: like father, like son. His grandfather was a troublemaker, his father was no different and Odin continued their way. From that day when he married a Barbò against my wishes, I knew I had a traitor in my ranks. I've watched him, knowing one day he would have thought bring trouble, same as his grandfather.' Mr Issel stopped, drank some water from the glass near him. He seemed less agitated now, but Demetra didn't dare to say anything yet.

'You want me to bring him to a comfortable Barbò area. Can you give me the guarantee that he will not start a new underground movement? I don't think so. He's born a troublemaker and he'll die as one. There is nothing I can do for you,' he concluded and rose from his chair. Demetra didn't move as wanting him to say something more.

He went up and down of his big study, silent and sulking. She noticed he glanced at her as thinking about something. Then suddenly he neared and said in a low voice: 'I've always admired Odin's open mind and his courage. I got the biggest shock myself when I was told he was the Head of the Underground Movement. He wanted to change the system, to save people from the illness they get from watching TV, i.e. from that device which, suppress-

ing some areas of brain regulates the human behaviour. You've lived abroad. You saw their towns full of crime, perversion, loose morals, etc. Do you remember the antique, beautiful palaces of Florence? What's become of them? Why did you get homesick? The answer is: you were missing clean, straight streets, well-groomed, well-mannered and well-dressed people. You've missed the paradise which my family created on this small piece of land.' He stopped again, but this time he was quiet and composed and was the Mr Albert Issel whom she knew for so many years.

'I thought you'd be generous with poor people, Barbò, whom you used to keep at peace in this country. Yes, they lack of high intellect, but they are human beings, same as you and me.' Demetra managed to utter, before he began to speak again.

'Barbò have the brain of pigeons. They cannot organise their life by following the laws. Some of them are prone to crime or other vices. Division between Barbò and Stakhanò is the natural order. Some were born with intellect and there are no ways to change or modify it. High-intellectual people were born for design and creation, to pursue the progress, while low-intellectual ones are for what? We've found an ideal solution: Stakhanò must work using their high intellect and Barbò must enjoy their freedom for which they've crowed for thousands of years. They got it without much trouble. What's the problem with watching TV? I don't see any problem here,' he shrugged his shoulders.

'But Barbò are dying, getting irreversible diseases,' Demetra whispered, as afraid of her own voice.

'No one is having everything for nothing. It's their payment,' he stated and added: 'Don't worry about Barbò. Recently we've decided to modernise our approach to Barbò's problem. Over the last few years, pharmaceutical industries created several new medications to manipulate human's brain. We were able to choose some pills which could be used in our case. Starting the coming autumn, we are introducing a *pill* which will re-

place watching TV. Barbò will take one pill per year, we'll say it's against cold and it will do the same job as watching TV.' Seeing Demetra's petrified face, he laughed loud. 'My dear, you should take care of your husband, study to cook and forget about being Stakhanò again. As long as I live, Odin will be where he is and you'll be Barbò. There is nothing more to say,' he dropped over his shoulder, quickly walking to the door. Demetra jumped from her chair and ran after him.

'Where are you rushing to? Stop for a moment.' Marcus appeared as from nowhere, catching her in his arms.

'I want to tell him something,' Demetra tried to free her from Marcus but it was in vain.

'You don't need to put yourself down. You must keep your pride. You are not lower than him,' Marcus whispered into her ear.

'I don't care,' Demetra stubbornly repeated, only then noticing Liz who stood not too far from them.

Straightening to her full height, smoothing her hair and momentary closing her eyes to calm herself down, Demetra forced a smile on her face and said to Liz: 'Thank you for letting me speak to your father. If you don't mind, I would like to go home. It looks like this meeting stressed me too much.'

'I was ready to offer you some tea, but we can have it some other day.' Liz replied.

'Thank you again. Greetings to Alexis. I'll be in touch with him.' Marcus took Demetra by her elbow and they slowly proceeded through all those long passages to the entrance door, escorted by Liz.

During their ride home, Demetra was silent and brooding over her meeting with Issel. In her head, she slowly went over her conversation with the old man again and knew she failed to get what she wanted. That man came out the winner, as he did for all his life. But she had a stubborn nature and she was a fighter, as her Russian ancestors. She promised to herself she would find a way to defeat that "mandarin mentality".

Marcus wanted to be acquainted with the details of her conversation with Mr Issel, but he didn't ask her yet. He patiently waited for her to be relaxed and be ready to raise the subject.

On their return home Demetra directly went to her computer and spent the rest of her day at it. He saw her researching for something, reading some articles but she didn't share with him her findings.

In the late evening when they usually drank their last cup of tea, in a quiet voice she repeated to Marcus all that occurred between her and Mr Issel.

'I told you he will never pardon Odin. It's more personal than anything else. I just feel sorry for you, getting all this trouble for nothing,' Marcus replied.

'As you know, the real reason for creating *Stimulazer* had nothing to do with us, common people. Someone needed a quiet, hidden from public eyes place, which could be used as a big storage for someone's treasure. It's as in Aladdin's cave. They've decided on the place, how to arrange it and what had to be done to run it smoothly. No one cared that those arrangements would bring sufferings to hundreds of thousands of citizens. What they care for "half-witted" Barbò? If they die, others will be born and so on. Well, I've made a decision about my future life. I am not going to force you to be with me if you don't feel like. But I must do this.' Demetra stopped and looked into his eyes to read his decision.

'I don't understand what you are talking about. I don't care about the past anymore. I am looking only to the future. You must think about your health only. Our health is our future. You know I'll never leave you, no matter what.' Marcus interrupted her.

'This is why, I've found how to solve Barbò's new dilemma, and I mean that new *pill* which will be introduced to them instead of watching TV. I've decided to go back to school, I mean to the University, and get a degree in pharmacy. I want to know as much as I can about the existing medications and dedicate the rest of my

life to the research on *pills* neutralising effects of psychological drugs used on humans.' Marcus was dumb struck.

She wants to spend all her time on studying something which she thinks can save poor Barbò. She must be mad, he thought. But maybe not so, was his second thought. Her ancestor was in the team which created *Stimulazer*; maybe Demetra wants to try to do the same.

'I know my decision took you by surprise, but I must do it.' Demetra looked at him with pleading eyes and he had no courage to contradict her.

'You may *succeed* with it, who knows,' Marcus replied, hugging his wife tighter and wondering about their future.

Epilogue

Fifteen years later.
London, Residence of Bert Blank, the head of the Spider Group branch.

'Did you hear Karsland is breaking up? I heard it from my niece, Liz, who is the President of that country,' Mel Sharon announced at his arrival.

'Sh, not so loud. Come here,' Bert Blank warned his cousin and brought him to his library. 'What's this news about Karsland?' he urgently asked.

'Liz sent me a coded message. We must remove all our treasures from there immediately. She was not able to stop the revolt, the Barbò are free and the country is in tumult, we must do something about it as fast as possible,' Mel Sharon blurted out.

Bert Blank plunked into the nearest chair. His face was pale, his breath was heavy, and he looked as if he was near to a complete collapse. His silence terrified Mel.

'Are you alright?' he bent over Bert, 'You need some water?'

'Idiot! Water? This is the end of our dreams. Centuries of accumulating wealth may be lost forever,' Bert barked, shifting himself to a better position. 'You must send the reply to her request immediately.'

'I have no place where to transfer tons of that stuff and the vast art collection. You tell me what to do,' Mel raised his voice up. 'I've dedicated all my life to serve our cause, but now it's over for me. I cannot do anything anymore. When you find the solution to your problem, call me and I'll send your answer to Liz. As for now, I must go. I have some customers today.' He turned to the door and quickly left the room.

Bert Blank continued to sit looking at the wall. He was lost. Spider Group, the biggest and richest secret organisation, could be collapsed without any back up of its wealth. Karsland was the best, cheapest and most comfortable solution which they had for so long and no one could think it could ever fall to pieces. Being a logical and methodical person, he knew there was no way to transfer quickly and in safety all the wealth that was there. He knew it will be also very expensive, considering the quantity of goods and the people whom they have to deal with. But they have no other choice. We must pay for everything, as usual, Bert thought, forgetting how they got in possession of all that wealth.

The story of the book is set in near future in the country of Karsland where people live in a new world. There old democracy has been replaced by Comocratia, a communal state where everything belong to the country and used in commune. The country is ruled by State Committee, a group of people chosen for their abilities. Population is divided in two groups based on their IQ and they lead the life accordingly; there is no crime, not even any kind of detrimental temptations; every citizen is contented with their living. Life goes on unchanged for over seventy years, until one day the murder of a man astonished the whole society and spreads fear of the coming future. Why?

When Demetra, a young attractive woman, who lives happily in her own small world in Karsland meets Marcus, self-confident and full of life bachelor, everything changed in her life once and forever. Her life becomes a continuous escape from danger, and she has to fight every day to stay alive.

The cover shows the painting: 'Girl with long plait'; by author's permission.